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Routledge, South Asia

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Writing Adivasi Women: Widening the Research Canvas

By Shashank Shekhar Sinha¹

Abstract
Adivasis have become visible in debates around Indigeneity, identity politics, conversion, development, and displacement, and more recently on climate change. However, gender remains a comparatively marginalized theme and Adivasi women or tribal women remain marginalized subjects. This article explores the broad themes and conceptual frameworks around which Adivasi women have gained maximum visibility in colonial and postcolonial India. It analyzes the trends in available research on Adivasi women and the problems involved. The article underlines the need to widen our research canvas, ask more questions, and consider more layers and complexities in research pursuits.

Keywords: Adivasis, Tribal women, Indigenous women, India, Development, Empowerment, Colonialism

Introduction
In an online search for academic books and articles on tribal women or Adivasi² women of India, there are three broad themes that appear repeatedly and prominently: their status, tales of courage and bravery, and development and empowerment. Interestingly, these three themes also came across as the most visible ones in the physical collections of the libraries when I did research almost twenty years ago for my first book on gender and tribe, Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters (2005). The presence of the Internet as a search and research tool had not become so established then, these three themes appeared more scattered than pervasive in books and articles, and “development and empowerment” was beginning to gain traction as an area. Now, writing this piece in 2023, things have of course changed but not at a desired pace, not even proportionately. Adivasis have indeed become more visible as subjects in debates around Indigeneity, identity politics, conversion, development, and displacement, and more recently climate change (see Damodaran and Dasgupta). However, gender remains a comparatively marginalized theme. It was hoped that with the maturing of Tribal Studies (some prefer to use the term Adivasi studies now), subaltern studies, gender studies, or even anthropology (where the study of the tribes began), more research on tribal women would have become available. Unfortunately, this has not been the case, at least not with mainstream academic research. Adivasi Studies has not been established in the same way that Gender Studies and Dalit Studies have. This exploratory article neither aims to present any comprehensive survey or historiography nor a documentation of all research done so far. Rather, it seeks to highlight some trends in available research to indicate the possibility of a more extensive research terrain. The article underlines the need to widen our research canvas, ask more questions, and consider more layers and complexities in research pursuits.

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² Literally meaning “Indigenous inhabitants,” but a term popularly used for Indigenous communities, tribes, or heterogenous tribal groups. In official language/government documents, they are described as “Scheduled Tribes.” Though these terms have specific connotations attached to them, they are being used synonymously for the purpose of this article.
Dominant Conceptual Frames

Let us now come back to the three frames—status, tales of resistance/heroism, and development and empowerment. Interestingly, these frames highlight the socio-economic locationscontexts where women began to become visible in academic writings. A combination of these three frames also accounts for the two dominant and linear approaches to the study of Adivasi women—“from tradition to modernity” and “from asymmetry to inequality.” Of these, the first frame—status—has been the most pervasive and widely-used one. Used frequently in anthropological studies, this frame primarily highlights the role and position of tribal women in tribal or traditional ethnic settings. The second frame, relating to heroism and resistance, also partially relates to women’s engagement with powers that are alien or external to the tribes, namely the colonial administration but sometimes other powers as well. The third frame relates more to the impacts of development projects in post-colonial India and schemes for the uplift of tribes and tribal areas. Post independence, the Indian government sought to develop the tribal areas, which were rich in mineral resources and forests, by setting up industries, mines, and other multipurpose projects. That the consequences of such initiatives were mostly counter-productive for the resident tribes is a story which needs to be told through detailed case studies. The government also enacted constitutional safeguards for the protection of the tribes and enunciated tribal welfare programs alongside empowerment through reservations and local governance. In a very broad way, these three frames also reflect some linearity in the study of the experiences of tribes and tribal women, from their traditional/ethnic settings to the impacts of colonial rule to their transitioning to a post-colonial and independent political regime. In some ways, the frames also underscore the evolution of conceptual frameworks for the study of tribal women.

Status as a Conceptual Frame

The term status has always remained an ambiguous one in terms of its usage; it has also been used variably in the study of different tribes—matriarchal or patriarchal, matrilineal or patrilineal. One of the most common usages of the term has been in relation to the role of tribal women in their community settings. It mostly takes into account mutual rights and duties of men and women alongside the traditional social safeguards. Another usage has been in relation to their position, more specifically, questions of prestige and honor, which also includes legal status and opportunities for participation in various matters related to the tribe (Xaxa). It was also argued that the status of women was not a function of their economic roles; it was determined more by the principle of social structure, patrilineal or matrilineal, in which a particular society was based (Sachchidananda).

In such schemes, a combination of social determinants like land inheritance, political participation, division of labor, religious inclusion and customs, and traditions like bride price and taboos have been cited to argue for a high or low status for tribal women. European or colonial anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin, C. Von Furer-Haimendorf, and J. H. Hutton tried to assess tribal societies (Nagas, Baigas, and Sema Nagas) through Western frameworks or principles of the Enlightenment to arrive at their respective conclusions (Xaxa 347-348). Later, as colonial anthropology and ethnography progressed, ideas of Social Darwinism and racial hierarchy became ascendant in studies on tribes and related assessments of women within. Adivasi women also gained scattered attention in writings by Christian missionaries such as P. O. Bodding. In all such cases, the focus remained mostly on the tribes in general and not tribal women.

With the emergence of gender studies around the 1970s and 1980s, women began to be incorporated in research on tribes and some dedicated studies also came into being.\(^3\) One can

\(^3\) The journal *Social Change* also published a special issue on “Status of Tribal Women in India” in 1993.
notice some broad and overlapping patterns in the first phase of writings on Adivasi women, many of which came about in the 1990s.

First, there was an attempt to assess tribal women’s status or position in traditional community settings, mostly in relation to tribal men. Some studies also made them subjects of comparison with women in caste societies or even women from scheduled castes. Interestingly, some such writings also generated a stereotype that still haunts research on Adivasi women. They argued that tribal societies are comparatively egalitarian and women in such societies enjoyed a much better position than their counterparts in caste societies.4

Second, there were concerns about tribal women being left behind in relation to policy and governance matters. The underlying idea was to highlight how their conditions of existence had not improved much despite the existence of development projects and welfare schemes, and how there was a need for more ameliorative policies. Such writings looked at the status of women in terms of demography, health, education, and employment. They also explored linkages between the status of women and the process of development and integration. There were concerns about exploitative work regimes, illiteracy, inhumane living conditions, and malnutrition.5

Third, some writings used a more fluid framework to analyze the impact of social change on the status of tribal women.6 Some publications also probed specific indicators of change such as the transition from bride price to dowry as a mark of changing status of women from high to low (Mishra). Others talked about the disjunction between the insider and outsider views of tribal identity to understand the extent of the freedom enjoyed by tribal women through an analysis of their symbolic and economic roles (Unnithan-Kumar).7

The second and third category of writings listed here engaged with the external environment, though in limited and varying degrees. However, the dominant focus remained the status of women. There are quite a few problems with an indiscriminate and unqualified usage of the term “status” as an analytical framework. Given the heterogeneity in the tribal population in India, it would be wrong to argue for a monolithic status of women in such societies based on some specific examples/case studies. Further, the socio-economic structures in which notions of status are embedded have not remained static or fixed—they have been dynamic and undergone changes. Likewise, comparisons with caste societies could be ambiguous and misleading. For in some matters, such as choice of partners or spouses, position of widows, sexual autonomy, and participation in economic activities, women in some tribal societies may seem to have a relatively better situation than women in caste societies. In other areas such as discriminatory land rights, witch hunts and related violence, political participation, and taboo regimes, such advantage appears to be neutralized. More importantly, what most studies undervalue is how under the impact of social and cultural change, many tribal societies have become Hinduized and closer to becoming castes; they have become complex and patriarchal with norms and traditions similar to caste societies (Sinha, Restless Mothers, 31-97). Others have become Christianized. In addition, welfare schemes, local governance structures, and reservation schemes have brought about significant transitions in tribal societies, to differing degrees, with important consequences for women. Unfortunately, status continues to remain one of the dominant conceptual frameworks for researching Adivasi women. While some use it critically, most do not. In recent years, there have been micro studies discussing reproductive health and the nutritional status of women among various tribes.

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5 See J. P. Singh et al., Tribal Women and Development; B. Chaudhuri; Mann, “Tribal Women”; Mann, “Social Change.”
6 See Chauhan, Tribal Women and Social Change; Chauhan, Tribal Women: Continuity.
7 This work was in the context of Girasia tribes of Rajasthan.
Negotiating Colonialism

One major transition for most tribal communities of central and northeast India manifested as a result of colonialism. Adivasi women’s negotiations with colonialism was a complex and layered one. However, like other members of the Tribe, they have gained visibility through a few studies related to anti-colonial revolts or other protest/resistance movements and socio-religious reform movements. Some works also highlight the role of Adivasi/peasant women in the Communist-led movements. Such studies, whether in the form of occasional passages, articles, or biographical accounts, are mostly descriptive. They document the participation of women in the anti-colonial or other resistance movements and show the different ways in which they contributed to the tribal revolts. For example, one can see Guha’s account of the Santhal Uprising (1855–1856) and K. S. Singh’s account of the Birsa Munda movement (1899–1900). Occasionally, the role of some iconic woman leader gets amplified too, a good example of which is Rani Gaidinliu’s Zeliangrong movement in the first half of the twentieth century (Kamei). In recent times, there have been some studies on specific women leaders, known or unknown (see Nag; Nag and Lalsangpui), especially in the Northeast region. There have also been attempts at doing women-centric studies of tribal revolts in some regions. However, some questions need to be asked through diverse case studies. Did the tribal resistance movements have any long-term impact on women’s political participation or leadership? Did any substantive women’s issues figure in the agenda of such movements? Did such movements bring in any significant change in the lives of women? Seen from the framework of gender, the relationship between tribes and colonialism was complex.

It would be wrong to say that tribal societies were completely immune to external changes before the colonial period. Colonialism, however, brought about significant and multiple changes in the way tribal communities lived, though its impact varied over time and space and for different regions and communities. It introduced new agrarian, property, industrial, and capitalist relations, which were backed by the courts of law. The impacts included, among other things, the breakdown of the communal mode of production and emergence of private rights in land, commercial exploitation of forests, a ban on shifting cultivation, penetration of market relations, intrusion of middlemen and moneylenders, social stratification, and emergence of feudal relations in land (K. S. Singh, “Colonial Transformations,” 1227-1228). While the Permanent Settlement (1793) introduced the idea of private property, the various survey and settlement operations, carried out through the late 19th and early 20th century, recognized the traditional patriarchal principle in land inheritance. Likewise, the legislations of 1894 (Forest Policy) and 1927 (Forest Act) severely restricted Adivasis’ customary access to forests and forest produce. Many moneylenders and middlemen, mostly non-tribals, also entered the tribal regions in the wake of agrarian changes introduced by the British. Gradually, they acquired tribal lands, cattle, and other belongings. Some works, primarily from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, talk about the broader impacts of colonial forest policies on Adivasi women and earlier communitarian systems of control, management, and output sharing. They also talk about how colonialism ruptured women’s relationship with land and forests. Women’s special relationship with forests and nature, as some scholars have highlighted, also had a basis in the gendered, traditional division of labor which required them

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8 See Guha; K. S. Singh, “Tribal Women.”
10 See Kannabiran and Lalita; Custers.
11 There are several other biographical accounts which mainly deploy a nationalist, eulogistic framework.
12 See Sinha, “Adivasi Movements and Beyond”; Mallick.
13 See Sundar; Thapar and Siddiqui.
to fetch fuel wood, fodder, water, and forest produce and herbs. Set in colonial Odisha, Gopinath Mohanty’s novel *Paraja* brilliantly depicts the machinations and comprehensiveness of the colonial intrusion and its impact on the lives of women through the story of a tribal family. Other studies explore the extended complex connections between colonialism, forests, diseases, gender, and witch hunting. Significant changes were also brought about by the setting up of mines and industries in the mineral-rich tribal regions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the intrusion of related capitalist work regimes. Among other impacts, the mines and industries attracted migrants from elsewhere, mostly caste Hindus known as the *dikus* (outsiders) by the Adivasis. These migrants appropriated most of the skilled jobs that emerged.

Displacement from traditional livelihoods, land alienation, restrictions on the use of forest resources, and absence of remunerative employment led to the socio-economic marginalization of the tribes. The distancing of the forests, the disintegration and destruction of residual rights in land, and the introduction of new agrarian relations led to a diminution in their economic roles in the traditional community settings. Additionally, the transformations brought about by colonial rule did not accommodate such displaced women in any meaningful capacity. Women suffered more, both as members of the Tribe and as women, a case of double marginalization. The Adivasis responded in multiple ways, including resistance movements against the colonial machinery and its collaborators, such as the money lenders or *zamindars*; socio-religious reform movements inspired by purity and pollution ideas of the caste Hindus, a phenomenon noticed particularly in areas where the tribes came into contact with the latter; and migrations to economic opportunities emerging in the neighboring states. The migrations were initially of seasonal or temporary nature directed to opportunities and sites opened by the expansion of roads, railways, mines, and industries, and then of longer, even permanent nature, as the tea gardens were opened by the British towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Some studies related to mines and plantations in Bengal and Assam shed light on the lives of women at such sites, including health conditions and how patriarchy manifested at work and in labor relations. They also show how Adivasi women, the once self-supporting agricultural workers and forest gatherers, were pushed to the margins of the emerging political economies as wage workers and contract laborers. Many questions remain inadequately researched. Were migrations only related to the push or pull factors or did patriarchal tensions also play a role (Samita Sen, “‘Without His Consent?’”)? How did the traditional gendered division of labor manifest at mines and plantations? Did gender play a role in the emerging wage structures? What impact did technological upgrading of mines and industries have on the employment prospects of Adivasi women? More importantly, how did patriarchal forces intersect with the colonial impacts, and how did market and capitalist relations impact the lives of tribal women?

There is one other area that has remained underexplored in studies about women: the role of socio-cultural changes. How did the influence of caste Hindus and Christian missionaries impact the lives of tribes and women therein? It was not just the non-tribal moneylenders and middlemen who entered the tribal regions in the wake of colonial intrusion. Christian missionaries also set up missions in tribal regions which were easier to convert. In some ways, the missions also deepened the roots of colonialism in remote, tribal geographies. The presence of Christian missionaries and caste Hindus brought about significant socio-cultural changes in the lives of tribals, especially where their physical presence was strong. Sociologists and anthropologists have studied such changes through frameworks like

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14 See Nathan and Kelkar; Damodaran; Das Gupta; Bandyopadhyay.
15 See Skaria; Sinha, “Adivasis, Gender, and the Evil Eye” 128-129.
Sanskritization, peasantization, Hinduization, assimilation, acculturation, emulation, transculturation, tribe caste continuum, tribes-in-transition, Hindu model of tribal absorption, and rank concession syndrome (Sinha, Restless Mothers, 160-203). How did these cultural changes impact the lives of Adivasi women? Not many case studies are available in these areas from various regions.

The Postcolonial Context

The conditions in the Adivasi areas did not change much in the aftermath of independence. Independent India followed a policy of further integration of the tribes with the mainstream. However, it also put into place some protective safeguards to preserve the autonomy of the tribes. A Tribal Welfare Department was instituted in 1951 for the protection and advancement of Scheduled Tribes (STs), as they came to be known after the 1951 Census. Certain constitutional safeguards were also instituted. Article 244 of the Constitution of India provided for administration of Scheduled Areas in accordance with the Fifth Schedule and Tribal Areas (of Assam) under Sixth Schedule (Hasnain 340). Several welfare schemes were also launched. There were systematic efforts to open the tribal areas. Many mineral and forest-rich tribal regions became the site of development projects, both government and private. A massive dispossession and displacement accompanied the development of capitalist enterprises like mines, industries, and other multipurpose projects in most parts of central India, though the degrees and intensities varied across regions. Loss of land to accommodate both the physical and human infrastructure was only a natural corollary. Adivasi lands, in many cases, were also acquired for the construction of railway stations, schools, colleges, roads, dams, river valley and hydroelectric projects, and thermal power stations (Vidyarthi 209). The phenomenon of dispossession took place both directly through deprivation of land and indirectly through denial of the benefits of development (Areeparampil 19).

In some ways, the impacts of this phase of displacement were more pronounced than in the colonial period, as it all happened in just a matter of a couple of decades, and under a nationalist regime. Some scholars and activists have used the term “internal colonialism” to describe the act of siphoning a tribal region’s mineral resources to facilitate the development of other areas and the related socio-economic imbalances (A.K. Roy). The process of industrialization and capitalist development affected Adivasis in several adverse ways. First, it rendered a large number of them destitute through evictions and also destroyed their traditional sources of livelihood (Simeon, “Jharkhand” 230). Second, industrial explosion and development of mines in the region were accompanied by phenomenal growth in urbanization and a large-scale influx of outsiders (commonly called dikus) seeking employment. They first displaced the Adivasis from jobs that required skilled labor and later from the unskilled sector as well. Third, a large number of Adivasi lands were also taken by the immigrants who successfully manipulated loopholes in various protective legislations (Thakur). This included non-tribal migrant men who married Adivasi women and later deserted them. All this happened in a context of shrinking access to forests and diminution in participation in agricultural activities. The 1952 Forest Policy basically marked a continuation of the old colonial policies: “What in 1894 had become rights and privileges, in 1952, became rights and concessions and then concessions” (Corbridge 137). The release of forestlands for agricultural purposes was withdrawn. The right to collect minor forest produce (MFP) from the reserve forests was taken away and separate village forests were prescribed for the purpose (Bhowmick 33-35). Adivasi women’s relationship with forests and land were ruptured even further.17 Distancing from forests was also accompanied by a decline in participation in agricultural activities in some regions (Prakash).

17 See Munshi; Nathan and Kelkar; Sinha, Restless Mothers.
It would be wrong to say that none of the Adivasis benefitted from the development projects. Some got absorbed into the mining and industrial sector, while others gained from the opportunities that arose from the expanding construction sector and the need for migrant labor. Some Adivasis also took advantage of the state policy of positive discrimination. The post-colonial state stuck to a policy of benign integration, along with policies for protection, exclusion, and positive discrimination. This manifested in a series of reform packages for the ST population. Seats were also reserved for STs in the central and state legislative assemblies and the public sector undertakings (Corbridge 136). It would not be wrong to say that such policies did contribute to the emergence of a small middle class or elite among the Adivasis.

For most Adivasis however, these new developments created serious problems of survival and livelihood, and the women suffered even more. Distanced from forests and land, they started working as casual laborers with forest contractors and agricultural landlords where they were subjected to exploitative working conditions. Those who sought employment in industries and mines also suffered from discriminatory wage structures and sexual exploitation. Sometimes improvisations in recruitment patterns, primarily in the organized sector, brought about its own share of problems. For example, following the nationalization of mines, many tribal women were edged out of their jobs by their non-tribal husbands under the guise of voluntary retirement schemes; the husbands themselves cornered these jobs, and some even deserted their wives later.18 Likewise, the impact that positive discrimination and welfare packages had on the lives of the Adivasi women is an area which awaits systematic and critical academic analysis.

The tribals responded to these tensions in a variety of ways. The responses included migrations (intra-state and inter-state), a rise in political activism: ethno-regional movements demanding separate statehood/autonomy, a spurt of anti-outsider agitations, a rise in Naxalism, and intensification in the witch hunts. There are no detailed studies from different geographies on how the lives of migrant Adivasi women changed as they transitioned from the role of self-supporting agricultural workers to wage and contract laborers.19 Many other questions also remain unasked. For example, what happened to the socio-cultural lives of women at the migration sites, especially where they came in contact with the caste-Hindu migrants? Speaking of the political movements, there are a few studies that show how women were involved, not with core political agendas, but more with women’s programs such as anti-wife beating, anti-liquor, anti-witch hunting, or those related to sexual exploitation.20 In the last few decades, women’s voices have been more direct and audible, even in formal channels. For example, there have been some attempts towards women questioning customary land rights in courts of law.21 Likewise, women’s voices have been audible in the environmental and ecological movements. We have heard about bigger movements like the Bishnoi movement, Chipko Movement, Aapiko Movement, Silent Valley Movement, and Narmada Bachao Andolan. Women’s voices are becoming more audible in states like Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, and Kerala. However, this has not been matched with the proportionate availability of academic articles or books. Women’s issues are also becoming visible in the Naxalite movements, though in a limited and scattered way. Some memoirs and autobiographies are also becoming available.22

19 See Rao; Sinha, “Adivasis, Gender and Migrations”; Ray.
20 See Mitra; Parulekar; Omvedt; Patel.
21 See Kishwar; K. S. Singh, “Land Rights.”
22 See Mallarika Sinha Roy; Shoma Sen; Kamra.
The new liberal reforms, growth in urbanization and globalization, in the last few decades have exposed tribal societies to a new set of external forces and dynamics. Corporations and multinationals have been set up in the proximity of regions inhabited by the tribes. Some protective legislations have also been enacted, such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) in 1996, which acknowledges the right of communities in the Schedule V areas to self-governance; Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act in 2006, which vests upon Adivasi women equal and independent rights over forests and forest land; and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act of 2013, which lays emphasis on the role of the local governance units in such matters. In addition to this, two new states have been carved out as tribal states for a more focused development. These include the states of Jharkhand, carved out of Bihar, and Chhattisgarh, carved out of Madhya Pradesh. While the intent behind such legislations continues to be debated, the actual functioning of these have failed to solve issues regarding land alienation, land acquisition, mining for minor minerals, ownership of minor forest produce, tribal control of money lending, and issues of local governance (Banerjee). There are also problems with the implementation of the Forest Right Act (FRA) of 2006. Two Adivasi women leaders recently approached the Supreme Court regarding the continued repression faced by forest-dwelling communities and tribals in availing their rights to forest land (Iyer). The growth of cities, urbanization, and industrialization have also opened new avenues and possibilities for migration, and women have migrated to cities as domestic laborers, care workers, or factory workers. However, there have not been enough studies to systematically assess the impacts of these changes across regions or tribes.

A recent work relating to four states with a high percentage of Adivasi population (Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal), which included field surveys from stone crushing sites, brick kilns, construction industries, and tea gardens, shows how such developments have led to the marginalization of women and their cultural silencing (De). Additionally, forcible eviction of the tribals by multinationals for new industries has led to severe displacement and poverty, and witch-hunting and trafficking of girls has intensified (De). Likewise, a study by Archana Prasad on the impact of neo-liberal reforms shows how the integration of the Adivasis, and Adivasi women in particular, is related to agrarian distress and macro-economic trends that contribute to the patterns of displacement, dispossession, and urbanization in the last couple of decades. Also, Adivasi women from both matrilineal and patrilineal communities have experienced similar degrees of proletarianization or semi-proletarianization though regional trends and landholding patterns (A. Prasad). There is not enough research on domestic workers, but one regional study by Sen and Sengupta on the role of maids in middle-class, urban households in Kolkata indicates that this could be a crucial area to explore. These part-time maids or domestic workers service a number of households at a time. They are neither recognized as workers by the employers or their own families nor by the government or the traditional trade unions. They are also rendered voiceless by their social location. Mostly uneducated and staying in illegal settlements as migrants, they work to survive and perform traditionally feminine and undervalued work, both paid and unpaid (Sen and Sengupta).

Adding Layers and Intersections

The preceding survey, which is intended to be neither comprehensive nor completely representative, clearly shows how, while studying Adivasi women, we need to go beyond categories frozen in time and space and keep in mind layers and complexities. It is important to keep the following considerations in mind.

23 See Majumdar; Palriwala.
First, the category of tribal women is not a monolithic or homogeneous one. Though the tribes constitute around 8.6% of India’s population, there are around 500 different communities of tribals in the country with enormous social, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic diversity (Sundar and Madan). They are found scattered across India in geographically differentiated terrains, pursuing different occupations, and speaking different languages. Their stories point to the multiplicity of cultures and different ways of living and thinking (Damodaran and Dasgupta 1354).

Second, to arrive at a more representative assessment, it is important to keep in mind the intersectionality of the contexts. Witch hunting is one such case. Witch hunting has commonly been explained in terms of superstition, lack of education and healthcare, or through the lens of gender tensions. Applying an intersectional lens helps us understand the other meanings of witch hunting in different contexts. For example, it has been pointed out how the intersection of patriarchal, communitarian, and anti-colonial tensions accounted for mass witch hunting during the 1857 rebellion in Chotanagpur (Sinha, “In Search of Alternative Histories”). Likewise, witch hunting in contemporary Assam is also seen as a new language of protest for silenced ethnic communities. It is seen as a medium of identity assertion in a region and society fraught with insurgency, identity politics, and consumerism in the last few decades (Nath). In a similar vein, witch hunting in Jalpaiguri tea gardens in the state of West Bengal has been understood as an unusual expression of social protest or as a periodic reaction by the alienated and oppressed Adivasi migrant workers against their conditions of life and work. This way, witch hunts are situated in the context of ongoing conflicts between the management and the workers within the tea plantations (S. Chaudhuri 14-15, 24). A recent publication on Chhattisgarh goes beyond the Adivasi to highlight the role of inter-caste dynamics in witch hunts, among other layers and complexities (Macdonald).

Third, Adivasi women have suffered both as members of their Tribe and as women. In their case, we need to employ a framework of double or layered marginalization.

Fourth, considering the diversified nature of Adivasi women’s experiences and the importance of intersectional contexts, we need dynamic inter-disciplinary or multidisciplinary conceptual frameworks that take into account the variations in their experiences across time and space.

Fifth, we need to contest the assumption that matrilineal tribes, such as some found in the Northeast region, are not or less patriarchal. Research from the Khasi tribes of Northeast India shows how men have used hierarchical political structures, patriarchal ideology, lust for power, and the state machinery to subdue women and neutralize the egalitarian principle that underlines matrilineal descent (Nongbri).

Sixth, it is also important to contextualize the role of the dominant community voices within the debates on patriarchy in such societies. One such example is women’s property rights, particularly inheritance. In Chotanagpur, most Adivasi men have resisted the idea of property rights in land for women, arguing that Tribal tradition provides for a khuntkatti system where the land is held collectively by the entire lineage. In such a perspective, there is no individual ownership of land; therefore, women cannot be extended land ownership rights. The idea of Adivasi women marrying outside the community is also opposed on similar grounds; such women are not only seen as aligning with the dikus but also acting as conduits of transfer of land from the tribes to non-tribes (Xaxa 362-364).

Finally, we need more regional studies that bring out the varied and complex experiences of Adivasi women. Presently, a large section of the existing studies relate to Jharkhand and Northeast India. More geographies and cultures need to be brought under the research terrain, including both silenced Adivasi and those that are speaking out.

In short, it is important to widen the research canvas, ask more questions, and explore layers and intersections that have not previously been addressed.
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