

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-02870-7 - Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991

Sumit Guha

Excerpt

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Introduction

There is little doubt that forests occupy a smaller fraction of the world today than they have done for some millennia, and people living in them form an even smaller, and ever-falling, proportion of the global population. However, as a consequence of the new environmental consciousness, academic inquiry into, and media coverage of these shrunken areas and shrinking populations has, in recent years, vastly increased in every part of the world. The historical dimensions of the issues involved are also increasingly coming to be recognised, as are its regional and local variations. These are the problems that the present book addresses. The book is not about the environment *per se*, but about the human use of the environment, and about the diverse communities that utilised it in distinct, but complementary, ways. It is also about how these communities sought to define themselves and organise their relations with others, and how they modified natural conditions in that process. The book thus deals both with the formation of ethnic hierarchies and the anthropogenesis of landscapes; hence it is also a contribution to the study of what Schendel has termed ‘ethnic innovation’ or ethnogenesis.¹

While these processes may be found throughout the world, my inquiry is focused on the margins of agriculture in Central and Western India, or a region slightly larger than the contemporary Indian state of Maharashtra. Those margins were, until the present century, determined largely by physiographic boundary between the plains and the mountains. This work, then, is also a study of the peoples of the Vindhyadri, Sahyadri, Satpura and Satmala ranges over the past few centuries. Even today, most of the surviving forests of the region are found in these mountains, and so are the bulk of the Scheduled Tribes in Maharashtra. According to a stock dyad in journalistic and academic discourse on South Asia, forests = tribals.² This is not a dyad to which I

¹ W. van Schendel, ‘The Invention of “Jummas”’: State Formation and Ethnicity in South-Eastern Bangladesh’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 26, 1 (1992), 126.

² So, for example, Felix Padel writes that ‘The people who live in these forest areas are *adivasis*, India’s “original inhabitants” or “aboriginals”, tribal people who have evolved a

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subscribe. Many difficulties arise from the protean nature of the category ‘tribe’ itself – a point made two decades ago in the devastating critique of this concept by Morton Fried, who pointed out that the numerous communities described as tribes could not be defined independently of the state systems with which they were associated. He also went on to demonstrate that attempts to classify them as primordial communities would not stand up to critical scrutiny.³ Fried concluded that tribal communities could be far better understood as secondary formations, reactions to the formation of states.⁴ Concrete examples of such processes at work exist in the form of two brilliant studies of the Chinese land frontiers and Northern Burma by Owen Lattimore and Edmund Leach respectively.

Lattimore argued persuasively that the formative period of Chinese society saw a differentiation between irrigated paddy farmers and nomad pastoralists, but it was

only when this diverging specialization had been carried to a certain point that the marginal steppe society ceased to be marginal and committed itself definitely to the steppe. Having reached that point it was ready to take advantage of a steppe technique of horse usage in order to increase the efficiency of life within the steppe environment.

Political consolidation of the steppe peoples followed on that of the agriculturists, with the Hsiungnu domain forming after the Chin consolidation, and with this the ‘two-thousand year history of the recognised Steppe Frontier had begun’.⁵ Cultural, technical and military differences arose out of divergent ecological specialisation, and were then used to organise tributary relations between the two sorts of community.⁶

Something very similar was proposed by Leach for northern Burma. He suggested a model in which cultural differences were structurally significant but did not indicate that the differing groups belonged to distinct social systems. Rather, he argued, human beings not separated by major geographical barriers were likely to have relations with each other, and ‘[i]n so far as these relations are ordered and not wholly

way of life suited to the forest over countless generations’ (*The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1). Similarly, the well-known environmental activist, Anil Agarwal, wrote in 1986 of ‘groups like the tribals’ having lived ‘in total harmony with the forests’ (*The State of India’s Environment 1984–85 – The Second Citizen’s Report* (Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1986), p. 376).

³ M. H. Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (Menlo Park CA: Cummings, 1975).

⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 12.

⁵ O. Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1962), pp. 59–62.

⁶ See also T. J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 9, 37–56.

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haphazard there is implicit in them a social structure'. The relations of Shan and Kachin were to be understood in these terms, and the contrast between Shan paddy farmers and Kachin swiddeners was 'in the first place ecological'. The movement of individuals or groups across the Shan/Kachin divide was, therefore, distinctly possible and sometimes accomplished.⁷ If Leach's work has a weakness, it is that he makes the transition from one ethnicity to another altogether too easy; it is possible that this was in fact the case in Northern Burma – a region of intensive social and economic change and strife for a century before Leach's arrival. Prolonged turbulence would certainly make the definition and policing of ethnic boundaries difficult, as populations scattered and fled amid war and insurrection. Such situations would, however, have to be exceptional, or else ethnicity would lose its value as a ranking and ordering system, and become a mere fashion accessory of little political significance. Yet we know that this was (and in much of the world is), far from being the case – identities profoundly affect destinies, and are imposed and rejected, sought and shunned accordingly. Ordered inequality based on ethnicity requires mechanisms of boundary definition and enforcement, as Frederik Barth pointed out some three decades ago.

Barth suggested that ethnicity was one of the ordering principles of pre-modern societies, that it served to organise day-to-day interaction and political relations. His study of Swat (north-west Pakistan) showed how this might operate, and result in a 'caste-like' ranking of communities quite independent of Brahmanical principles of purity and pollution. It offers us therefore some idea of how relations might be organised by communities peripheral, by chance or choice, to the Brahmanical world. Nor should we forget that such communities – from Achaemids to Turks and Afghans – were periodically to be found as rulers in the core areas of Brahmanical culture throughout its history, and long-sustained rule would have generated patterns of interethnic political and social relations that did not conform to the initially still unevolved scriptural model.

Barth proposed an 'ecological' model for Swat society, and in some measure what follows is also a model inspired by his work, more especially by his suggestion that natural conditions, including relative productivity and inaccessibility, were crucial to delimiting the zone within which a 'Pathan' life-style was viable. It could exist, he argued, in regions that were sufficiently rugged to be inaccessible to central authority, but yet not so sterile as to preclude the creation of a hierarchy

⁷ E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1968) pp. 17, 20.

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of exploitation.⁸ In the twentieth century such ‘no-go areas’ were limited to the North-east and North-west of the Indian sub-continent but (I argue) in earlier times they existed in every part of it.

However, I should emphasise that the woodland ‘niches’ I speak of were utilised as bases for social, economic and political initiative: therefore the transgression of their boundaries, and the flow of personnel and resources into and out of them was a constitutive, and not an accidental process. South Asia has come to possess one of the most complex sets of interethnic relations in the world, and while my focus will be on a single boundary zone – that which ran along the margin of tillage – I hope it will also contribute to the understanding of social processes in the sub-continent as a whole.

Nor are these issues of purely historical interest. I have already mentioned the new global interest in and sympathy for endangered ethnicities.⁹ In addition to the environmental concerns about endangered species and ecosystems, there is also the parallel concern for endangered cultures and ‘indigenous’ peoples – a concern perhaps strongest in those parts of the world (such as the Americas) where such entities have been most effectively triturated in the recent past. This retrospective affection has now extended to checking any possibility of the recurrence of such events in other continents, and constituted the category of ‘indigenous peoples’, who are presumed to exist in every part of the world except Europe. Funds being forthcoming, entities could not be lacking, and lists of such peoples have duly been generated, helped, of course by the poetic vagueness with which they are often defined. Ibrahim Fall, coordinator of the United Nation’s International Decade of Indigenous People (1995–2004) described them as people who ‘have always lived where fate set them down before other people arrived on the scene to live alongside them . . .’¹⁰

In India the groups categorised in the Constitution (1950) as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ have been classified as indigenous by international experts, quite regardless of their actual histories; while in East Asia an even more bizarre logic prevailed in the selection, with 2,900 Russians being listed among the ‘indigenes’ of China, while the claim of the Han to such

⁸ F. Barth, ‘Pathan Identity and its Maintenance’, in Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (repr. Oslo: Scandinavian University Books, 1970).

⁹ Sometimes endangered peoples are presented as just another endangered species; a delegate at the second conference of the Indigenous Initiative for Peace held in Paris from 13 to 17 February 1995 told a reporter: ‘If you want to see a Karen in the year 2000 you’ll have to go to a museum’ (Sophie Boukhari in *UNESCO Sources*, issue 67, March 1995).

¹⁰ Report by Sophie Boukhari in *UNESCO Sources*, issue 67, March 1995.

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status was rejected!¹¹ Many champions of such peoples have a distinctly limited knowledge of their past history – so, for instance, the new frontiersman Julian Burger, secretary of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, asserts that in India (and elsewhere in Asia) the colonial process ‘left these people to their own devices’ and it is only after decolonisation that ‘their comparative independence [was] eroded at an alarming rate’.¹² Historically informed anthropologists and economists such as G. S. Ghurye and D. R. Gadgil, have long been critical of such ideas and I hope to show how their scepticism is fully supported by the historical record.¹³ I also hope that the present volume will contribute to a more informed understanding of such categories as ‘indigenous’ or ‘aboriginal’, especially since such knowledge now apparently influences decisions such as the determination of the entitlements of people displaced by dam projects.

So, for example, a review of the Sardar Sarovar project in Central India comments that ‘[w]hether or not these people are truly tribal in terms of World Bank definitions is of great significance to the Bank, the people and the three Indian states . . .’¹⁴ The experts quoted by the *Independent Review* certainly had some notion that various ethnic groups located on both banks of the Narmada were indigenous in much the same way as the Indians of the Americas, and had a not dissimilar history. Felix Padel (as cited by the *Review*) wrote:

like other tribal peoples of Central India, a tribal society analogous to those of Africa or America, particularly in the sense of their connection with the *land*: their religion is based in their relationship with their natural environment, and their economy involves a close dependence on the forest and a high degree of self-sufficiency.¹⁵

The *Review* then expounded its own understanding of tribal history, which was that there had been a

great length of time during which tribe and non-tribe . . . coexisted on the Indian subcontinent. Archaeological evidence indicates that it was at least 2,000 years ago when the Aryan ‘newcomers’ began to invade from the north. It is in relation to them that the *adivasis*, the original dwellers, constitute an aboriginal or tribal population. The *adivasis* resisted integration; they moved across large

¹¹ Pointed out by B. K. Roy Burman, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1994), pp. 17–18.

¹² J. Burger, *Report from the Frontier: The State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 5, 12.

¹³ G. S. Ghurye’s early and scathing attack on these ideas is *The Aborigines – ‘So-Called’ – and Their Future* (Poona: The Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, 1943); see also D. R. Gadgil’s preface to this work.

¹⁴ *Sardar Sarovar: Report of the Independent Review* (Chairperson: Bradford H. Morse) (Bombay: Narmada Bachao Andolan, n.d.), p. 63.

¹⁵ Cited in *Review* p. 67.

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geographical areas as a result of economic, administrative, and military upheavals, in a web of change that spread over centuries.¹⁶

The author is evidently unaware that the term *adivasi* was coined but a few decades ago as an equivalent of the colonial category ‘aboriginal’ – and also assumes that tribal and aboriginal are synonymous. The two terms, however, have quite different meanings; tribal refers to the political organisation of a community, while aborigine means one present from the beginning (*origo*) or (literally) ‘of the sunrise’. Any identification of a particular group of people as aborigines of a particular area implies the existence of a substantial genetic continuity between them and the first human populations of that region – a hypothesis with some limited validity in the New World, but quite unsubstantiated in the Old. The equivalence of tribal and aboriginal originates, in fact, in nineteenth-century racial theory, which argued that certain ‘races’, notably the Africans, were incapable of progressing beyond ‘tribal’ organisations, unless forcibly integrated into societies dominated by ‘superior races’.¹⁷ It is a consequence of this idea that aboriginals are tribal, and tribals aboriginal.

Nor is the World Bank’s definition of ‘tribal peoples’ any more coherent than those criticised by Fried – the criteria turn largely on the presence or absence of the infrastructure of a modern state in the territory inhabited by particular groups. Applied to South Asia, it would have resulted in perhaps 90 per cent of the population of South Asia being classified as ‘tribal’ at the beginning of the current century. These and other problems arise from the uncritical adoption of categories from earlier paradigms, and it is for this reason that my first chapter opens with a history of racial science in relation to the classification of forest peoples. This is a necessary preliminary to a scrutiny of ‘the web of change’ which seeks to see it as a fabric and not a ragbag, and its component peoples as changing, adapting, and innovating in ways that cannot be fitted onto the Procrustean bed constructed by armchair anthropologists in the nineteenth century and globe-trotting consultants in the twentieth. The historical hypotheses shaped by such ideas are then compared with the findings of contemporary archaeology, as well as with some literary accounts of early Indian society, and the hypothesis that is to inform the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.

¹⁷ A point vigorously made by the anthropologist John Crawfurd, ‘On the Physical and Mental Characteristics of the African or Occidental Negro’, *The Ethnological Journal* (1865) 166–75; the French savant Cuvier’s taxonomy noted among the specific characteristics of the ‘Negro race’ that ‘the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of utter barbarism.’ G. Cuvier *The Animal Kingdom Arranged in Conformity with its Organisation*, trans. H. M’Murtrie, 4 vols. (New York: Carvill, 1831), I, p. 52.

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later chapters is laid out. What is suggested, then, is that when the second urbanisation and agrarian settlement in the great river valleys began to elaborate the outlines of a sub-continental political and cultural system in the first millennium CE, the nascent centres of that civilisation were part of an interacting continuum of communities that occupied, thickly or thinly, the whole of South Asia. The differentiation that began to occur was socio-cultural rather than technological or productive, and the communities of the riverain plains, the forest, the savanna, the desert and the mountains co-evolved in continuous interaction involving both conflict and cooperation over the next two millennia.

The environments and lifeways in and around the forests during the current millennium form the subject of the next chapter, which emphasises the role of human activity in these zones. Taking up an issue broached in the first chapter, it considers the effects of human activity on the fauna and flora of peninsular India, and argues that it considerably modified the ecosystem. Such an argument has recently been made by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach for West Africa. Their intensive research challenges the desiccationist ideas that have dominated tropical environmentalism since the nineteenth century, and has brilliantly demolished the notion that West African forests are but the miserable remnants of vast woodlands destroyed by human action.¹⁸ However, while *Misreading the African Landscape* convincingly shows that savannas were more extensive and woodlands smaller in the later nineteenth century than at present, and also demonstrates how agricultural settlements have promoted afforestation, it does not account for the presence of savanna in a humid tropical environment. Could it, in turn, be attributed to the range management practices of pastoral communities? Their political and ecological influence in the forest-savanna mosaic of South Asia is the subject of another section. The chapter concludes with a section considering the career, semantic and social, of a mobile ethnic group – the Beda (hunters), whose first appearance on the stage of history in the seventh century CE found located them in the wooded hills of western Karnatak. It tells the story of their subsequent career as a border militia, their journey northward and their incompletely achieved aspiration to regal power and warrior status.

Moving from the examination of communities whose activities spanned considerable distances to the intensive study of a limited area, the subsequent chapter (3) looks at the processes, strategies and risks

¹⁸ J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); on desiccationism, see R. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 346–77.

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involved in state-formation in the rugged jungle lands bordering the prosperous plains and wealthy ports of western India. It seeks to understand the logic of developments that unfolded over 500 years as forest chiefs fought and negotiated with the Sultanate of Gujarat, the Portuguese Estado, the Mughal Empire, the Maratha states, and finally the British Empire. In the next chapter we move on to look at the political and cultural interaction between the communities of the Sahyadri range and the potentates and invaders of the region over a similar period, noticing, in the process, the strategic use of terrains and identities by lords and peasants alike.

The next chapter shifts the geographical focus to regions and communities long regarded as archetypically ‘tribal’ – the Bhils and Gonds of central India. As with the ‘Beda’ of chapter 2, we find Bhilla to be an ethnonym that has travelled from its original home before reaching its fifteenth-century lodgement. As in the previous chapters, we find a long history of active participation by these supposedly isolated peoples in the politics of their regions – a participation curtailed only by the centralising drive of the colonial state in comparatively recent times. The subsequent chapter pulls together available materials – largely from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in which forest peoples express their outlooks and aspirations.

These are then related to their response to the colonial regime. Its divergent social and political consequences for different groups in the forest areas are analysed next, and explanations for the variations are sought in the context of both environmental and social changes that have continued down to the present. The role that the modern regime of the forests played in isolating one segment of the population within the newly drawn boundaries of the forest is highlighted in order to make the point that the resulting primitivisation of these peoples is a recent consequence of the breakdown of their political system. The working of paralegal and extralegal forms of power in the colonial period and after, and their socio-economic effects are highlighted here. It is argued that by concentrating solely on the truncated remnant of the old hierarchy, observers overlooked the living apex of the new one, succumbed to the notion of the simple, primitive and egalitarian forest tribe, and hence failed to see the simplified, primitivised, silvicultural proletariat that it was being hammered into becoming. The divergent destinies of different forest communities in the modern era are related to their previous history and social roles. The next chapter examines the nature and impact of state policies aimed at the ‘welfare’ of forest communities before and after independence, as well as their interaction with broader social and political changes. It suggests that the efforts to sedentarise the

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tribal communities and protect their land rights were not the unqualified failure that they are sometimes supposed to be, and that the Scheduled Tribes increasingly entrenched themselves as farmers even as this became the least rewarding sector of the Indian economy. This limited success is related to the changing politics of independent India and the chapter ends with an allusion to contemporary processes of ethnogenesis by differentiation of and infiltration into the tribal communities. This leads into the conclusion in which we review the economic, social and ideological trajectory from the past into the present, and an afterword in which I clarify my understanding of the political implications of the histories just outlined.

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1 From the archaeology of mind to the archaeology of matter

Static societies, changeless races

As K. Sivaramakrishnan recently pointed out, one of the persistent ironies of postcoloniality ‘has been the way elites assuming the task of building a national culture and providing it with a liberatory/progressive history have turned to modes of knowledge and reconstruction produced in the colonial period’. And of the varied strands that have constituted the twentieth-century colonial and postcolonial knowledge of India, none is more central than the notion of the timeless, conservative caste, and its antediluvian ancestor, the unchanging primitive tribe.¹ The Asians, being a non-progressive people, did not change – they merely accumulated, with the latest addition to the population overlying its predecessor, much as geological strata did. The missionary ethnographer John Wilson was one of the earliest proponents of this idea, suggesting in 1854 that conquered indigenous tribes were incorporated into ‘Aryan’ society as lower castes.² Elsewhere, he wrote that the ‘Depressed Aboriginal Tribes’ were ‘evidently the remains of nationalities subdued and long grievously oppressed and abhorred by those who have been their conquerors, and have held themselves in every respect to be their superiors. I refer to such tribes as the Dheds of Gujarat, the Mahars or Parvaris and Mangs of the Maratha country and the Bedars of the Southern Maratha Country.’³ He then went on to make a laboured and unconvincing effort to trace the Dheds to the Daradas and to make the Mahars the source of the regional name Maharashtra.

¹ K. Sivaramakrishnan, ‘Unpacking Colonial Discourse: Notes on Using the Anthropology of Tribal India for an Ethnography of the State’, *Yale Graduate Journal of Anthropology*, 5 (1993), 57; also Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 65, 69–71.

² John Wilson, ‘Exposure of Hindu Caste’, *The Oriental Christian Spectator* (January 1854).

³ John Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes of the Bombay Presidency: A Fragment* (Bombay Government Press, 1876), pp. 21–2.