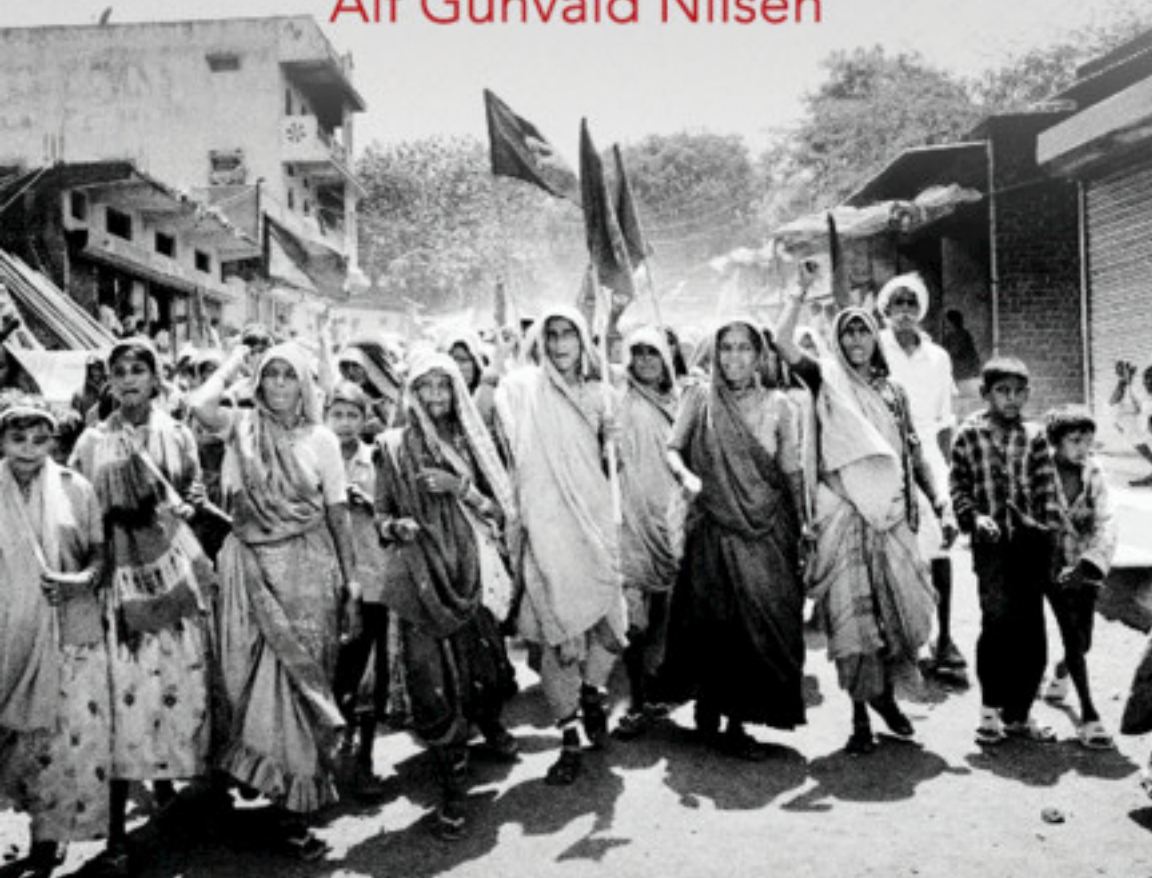
SOUTH ASIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES 7

ADIVASIS AND THE STATE

Subalternity and Citizenship in India's Bhil Heartland

Alf Gunvald Nilsen



Adivasis and the State

Adivasis and the State presents a major study of how subalternity is both constituted and contested through state–society relations in the Bhil heartland of western India. Deciphering the complex transformations wrought by colonial and postcolonial state formation, the book develops a fine-grained analysis of the historical processes that ultimately resulted in the subordination of Bhil Adivasi communities to an everyday tyranny of predatory and coercive interactions with the local state.

Adivasi engagements with postcolonial democracy are analysed through an in-depth ethnography of how local *sangathan*s in rural districts of western Madhya Pradesh have organised and mobilised to democratise local state–society relations. Focusing on citizenship as a pivot of struggle, this book interrogates the oppositional local rationalities that make collective action possible and the ways in which rights-based claims and demands from below transform the meanings of governmental categories, legal frameworks, and universalising vocabularies of democracy.

The book also reveals how dominant groups mobilise coercion through both the state and civil society in order to halt the political advances of subaltern Adivasis. At the core of the book lies a concern with understanding the dialectics of power and resistance that give form and direction to the political economy of democracy and development in contemporary India. Towards this end, *Adivasis and the State* contributes a sustained and nuanced Gramscian analysis of hegemony in order to interrogate the possibilities and limits of subaltern political engagement with state structures.

Alf Gunvald Nilsen teaches in the Department of Global Development and Planning at the University of Agder, Norway. He has authored *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage* (2010) and co-authored (with Laurence Cox) *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism* (2014). He has also co-edited *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* (2015) and *Social Movements and the State in India: Deepening Democracy?* (2016).

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For Srila

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List of Maps, Figures, and Tables

Glossary of Hindi Terms

Please note that many terms are represented in English using multiple different spellings, particularly in archaic transcriptions, and so may be found under another spelling.

ashram	religious centre
abkari	excise revenue
achha kaam	good work
adivasi	first inhabitant
atta	flour
baniya	trader
bazaar	market
bazaariya/bazaariya-log	person/people from the market; refers to non-Adivasi city-dwellers
begar	forced labour
Bhagwan	God
bhai	brother
bhauband	kin-based group attached to a Bhil chieftain
bolai	tax claimed by Bhils in Mewar on travellers on the Udaipur–Ahmedabad Road
chanda	donation
chappal	shoe
chaprasi	office assistant
charpoy	bedstead
chowkidar	guard
crore	ten million
daal	lentils
dalal	broker/middleman
darbar, durbar	princely court
daru	liquor
dewan	chief minister of princely state

dharna	sit-down demonstration
eki	unity
elaka	neighbourhood
faliya	hamlet
forest-*wallah*	forest guard
gameti	village headman
gaonliya	derogatory term for village-dweller
ghat	mountain pass and/or valley
ghee	clarified butter used for cooking
gherao	demonstration where a building or person is surrounded.
giras hak	tribute paid by caste Hindu villages to Bhil chieftains
goonda	bully, muscleman
gram sabha	village council
hak, haq	right (also used to refer to tribute payments, cf. *giras hak*)
jal	water
jangal	forest
khet, kheti	field, cultivation
kowl	written pledge/agreement
lakh	one hundred thousand
lok Sabha	parliament
maharana, maharani	king, queen
mahua	home-made liquor
makrani	mercenary
mankar	cowherd
nakedar	forest guard
neta	political leader
nevad	field cultivated in the forest
pal	hamlet
patel	hereditary headman
patta	title deed for agricultural land
patwari	revenue official
pergunnah	administrative unit in princely state
praja	people
raja	king
rajpramukh	governor of a princely state
rakhwaldar	chieftain claiming *rakhwali* taxes
rakhwali, rakhwaldari	tax claimed by Bhils in Rajasthan on travellers on the Udaipur–Ahmedabad road.
ram-ram	polite greeting

rasud	supplies
roti	flat-leavened bread
saab	sir
saala, saala bhilre	bastard, Bhil bastard
sahukar, sahukari	moneylender
sangath, sangathan	organisation
sarkar, sarkari, sircar	state, belonging to the state
sarpanch	elected village head
seekhna	learning
sepoy	soldier
seth	moneylender/trader
seva	service
sibandi	arab mercenary
sowar	soldier
tehsil	administrative level (sub-district)
tehsildar, tehsil-wallah	administrative official at *tehsil*-level
thakur	landlord
thana	police outpost
thanedar	head of police outpost
thikanedar	landlord
tika	red vermillion mark placed on a person's forehead as a blessing
tukavee	loan given to cultivators by state authorities
veth	forced labour
vidhan Sabha	state legislative assembly
zameen	land
zamindar	feudal landlord

Preface

This is a book about subaltern politics in India—and especially about what happens when subaltern groups organise and mobilise to stake democratic claims in relation to the state. What makes it possible for them to come together? What kind of claims and demands do these groups articulate? How do they engage with the state, its representatives, and its institutions? What changes can subalterns bring about through collective action? In the following pages, I try to answer these questions through a detailed case study of local social movements among Bhil Adivasis in western Madhya Pradesh.

The term Adivasi literally means First Inhabitant, and expresses a claim to being indigenous.[1] The origins of the term can be traced to 1930s, and the efforts of activists from tribal groups in what is now the state of Jharkhand to stake a claim for recognition in the context of the making of a new nation. '[M]ost of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned', the Adivasi leader Jaipal Singh Munda told India's Constituent Assembly in 1946. 'I take you all at your word', he continued, 'that now we are going to start a new chapter, a chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected' (cited in Guha 2007a: 318). As it turned out, the Indian state did not recognise Adivasis as indigenous people. Rather, in state discourse they are defined as Scheduled Tribes under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, which provide a range of protective legislation, special entitlements, and reservations for Adivasis in public sector employment and higher education.[2] Moreover, the Indian state has fundamentally betrayed Jaipal Singh Munda's hopes that Independence

[1] For a selection of academic perspectives on the issue of indigeneity in the Indian context, see Bétéille (1986), Singh (1985), Prasad (2003), Ratnagar (2003), Karlsson (2016), Baviskar (2016), Bates (1995), Damodaran (2006), Shah (2007a), and Sundar (2016a).

[2] Schedules are lists in the Constitution that categorise and tabulate the state's bureaucratic activity and policy. The Fifth Schedule applies to the overwhelming majority of tribal communities in the Adivasi belt that stretches from Maharashtra and Gujarat in the west to Bihar and Bengal in the east. The Sixth Schedule applies to the northeastern states and bestows considerable autonomy upon tribal groups in Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, and Manipur.

would usher in a new age of greater equality and recognition—a betrayal that is writ large in the fact that an estimated 45 per cent of India's 104 million Adivasis currently live below the country's poverty line (World Bank 2011).

In recent years, Adivasis have occupied a fairly prominent place in public debates in India. This is due in no small part to the fact that Adivasi communities are widely believed to constitute the core support base of what former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once labelled as the country's 'gravest internal security threat'—namely the Maoist insurgency in the so-called Red Corridor. Controlled by the Maoist guerrillas, the Red Corridor is a largely forested area that stretches from Bihar in the east to the northern fringes of Tamil Nadu in the south, and encompasses some of the poorest parts of India's territory. It is generally accepted that Adivasi support for the Maoists is related to the rampant impoverishment and dispossession that characterises tribal life in this area.[3]

This book is not about Adivasis and Maoists in central and eastern India. *Adivasis and the State* focusses instead on a strand of tribal politics that has received comparatively less attention in the existing scholarly literature, namely democratic organising and mobilising at community-level among Bhil Adivasis in western India. Most of this activism, which flourished from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, was grounded in grievances related to everyday interactions with the local state and basic livelihood issues revolving around land and forest rights. The origins of the book can be traced to my doctoral research on the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA).[4] During the course of my fieldwork in the early 2000s, I interviewed a number of Bhil activists in the submergence zone of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Madhya Pradesh about their involvement with the NBA.[5] While they were happy

[3] Among the left and liberal intelligentsia in India, the Maoist movement and the issue of Adivasi support and participation has given rise to a polarised debate over political agency and strategy. This debate is played out between those—like Saroj Giri (2009), Radha D'Souza (2009), and Arundhati Roy (2010)—for whom the Maoist movement represents an authentic expression of the political subjectivity of Adivasis, and those—like Ramachandra Guha (2007b), Jairus Banaji (2010a), and Aditya Nigam (2010)—for whom Adivasis are caught in a bind between state violence and Maoist violence. The most recent intervention in this debate is Nandini Sundar's (2016b) seminal book on Maoism and counterinsurgency in Bastar. See Pandita (2011), Mukherji (2012), Navlakha (2012), and Choudhary (2012) for journalistic accounts of the Red Corridor.

[4] This work was carried out from 2002 to 2006. My doctoral dissertation was subsequently published as a monograph entitled *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage* (Nilsen 2010).

[5] The Sardar Sarovar dam is being built in eastern Gujarat, just across the border from Madhya Pradesh. The majority of those who will be displaced—both Adivasis and caste Hindu farmers—reside in Madhya Pradesh, where 193 villages lie in the submergence zone of the dam (see Nilsen 2010: chapter 1).

to share their stories with me, I found that they were most enthusiastic, and their narratives most detailed and textured, when they spoke about their involvement in a movement that preceded the NBA—the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS). The KMCS was a relatively small outfit that organised and mobilised Bhil Adivasi communities in Alirajpur, which at that time was a *tehsil* (sub-district) in the southern parts of Jhabua district.[6] The KMCS protested against the corruption and violence of the local state and for the rights of Bhil communities to cultivate land in the forest. Activists would speak with great passion about how the Sangath, as it is also referred to, had made it possible for them, for the very first time in living memory, to stand up and talk back to local oppressors such as forest guards, police constables, and revenue officers. And, as I soon found out, the KMCS was only one of many such movements in Madhya Pradesh, which had existed somewhat in the shadow of the NBA and its spectacular struggle against dam-building in the Narmada Valley.

It struck me that there was a story to be told about these movements—a story with many layers. A story about how certain communities had come to be cowed down by a state that should represent and serve them. A story about how oppression wrecks life chances. A story about how overcoming fear and gaining courage is at the heart of activism. A story about how democracy both shapes and is shaped by the collective action of subaltern groups. And a story about how powerful groups respond when those at the very bottom of the societal pyramid challenge their rule. *Adivasis and the State* is an attempt to bring all these strands together in a rich narrative about subalternity and citizenship in the region that I call the Bhil heartland.

In order to tell this story, I had to return to western Madhya Pradesh for fieldwork, which I did as a postdoctoral researcher over an 18-month period in 2009 and 2010. When I conceptualised the project, I had imagined that the data collection would be carried out in a fairly conventional way—in-depth interviews mediated by a translator speaking local tribal languages such as Bhili, Bareli, and Bhilali. As it happened, things turned out quite differently. In August 2009, I travelled to Sakad, a small village close to the market town of Sendwha, which straddles the Agra–Mumbai highway close to the border with Maharashtra. I went there to interview two former KMCS activists, Amit and Jayashree. After they left the KMCS in the middle of the 1990s, this couple had bought a piece of land in Sakad and established a school—Adharshila—which provided education for Adivasi children from Alirajpur, Badwani, and Khargone districts. Drawing on

[6] Alirajpur became a separate district in 2009. Some 26 villages in the area where the KMCS was active were slated for submergence by the Sardar Sarovar reservoir (see Nilsen 2010: chapter 4).

alternative pedagogies and curricula, Adharshila was a much-needed and highly regarded initiative in a region where educational opportunities for Adivasis are few and far between.

In the evening after I arrived, Amit, Jayashree, and I sat outside the house that was home for them and their two children, sipping tea and discussing my project. I told them that I wanted to write a book that told the story of the KMCS and other movements like it. After a while, Amit told me: 'We want to talk to you about your method'. The couple took turns explaining to me how they had also been wanting for some time to collect oral histories from Adivasi activists in the region, and asked me whether I would be interested in collaborating with them in such an endeavour. I immediately agreed. It was obvious to me that this was a rare and wonderful opportunity to collect data in a collective and cooperative manner, rather than simply parachuting in and airlifting out again in the way that is all too familiar in standard academic research.

We started discussing how we would go about this project, and Jayashree suggested that I team up with some of the teachers at the school—several of whose parents had been active with the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS), a movement that I had selected as the second case study for the project—and carry out interviews in the region. To prepare for the work that lay ahead, we organised a two-day workshop at Adharshila where we discussed what research is, why it was important to document the history of the KMCS and the AMS, and how to carry out interviews. We designed a comprehensive interview guide in Hindi, which was translated into Bareli. After a couple of pilot interviews with activists from nearby villages and some fine-tuning of the interview guide, we began criss-crossing Alirajpur, Badwani, and Khargone by bus, tracking down KMCS and AMS activists and conducting a series of interviews—sometimes with individuals and sometimes with groups. It is hard to tell exactly how many activists we interviewed altogether, but a rough count suggests about 60. In addition, during the same period, I interviewed about ten English-speaking middle class activists like Amit and Jayashree on my own. That the lion's share of the data gathering that went into the research for this book was collective in nature is reflected in the use of the first-person plural pronoun when referring to interviews carried out by what we eventually came to refer to as the Adharshila research team.

A final reflection on the nature of the data that was collected in this way is necessary. A key problem in researching the KMCS and the AMS is the fact that neither movement has generated anything like a substantial written archive. With the exception of one autobiographical account written by a middle class KMCS activist, there are very few activist writings that can be drawn on to reconstruct the overall trajectory of the two movements, or, for that matter, specific protest events. Media reports were few and far between—both in English and Hindi

newspapers—and the few newspaper clippings I was able to obtain were often marred by very poor reporting. The KMCS archives were in disarray and more or less impossible to investigate in a systematic way. The AMS archives were in a slightly better state, and I was able to extract a number of reports that made it possible for me to reconstruct a particularly decisive period in the Sangathan's history when it was violently repressed by a range of state and non-state actors. It also proved very difficult to obtain police records and intelligence reports that could throw light on specific protest events and more general movement activities in any substantial way.

Consequently, my attempt to reconstruct and analyse both local state–society relations in Chapter 2 and key dimensions of the organising and mobilising processes in Chapters 5 and 6 are based almost exclusively on in-depth interviews with Adivasi and middle class activists, who drew on their memories of events that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. This means, of course, that I have worked with a data set marked by that classical feature of oral history narratives: different people remember the same events differently and in ways that might deviate to greater or lesser extents from an objectively factual account of, for example, a specific conflictual encounter with state personnel or a particular sit-in demonstration or protest march. While I have tried, whenever and to the extent that it has been possible, to craft reconstructions of trajectories and events that are as detailed and factual as possible by comparing accounts and sounding out interviewees about discrepancies, I have come to accept that the interview data that I draw on in this book may be partial or otherwise flawed in point of fact. As Alessandro Portelli (1991: 2) notes in his reflections on factual deviations in oral history narratives, errors are not necessarily a weakness in the data. Whereas errors and deviations might occlude what actually happened at specific moments and particular places, they nevertheless enable us 'to recognise the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them'—and this, the dreams and desires of those who have risked so much to change the worlds they inhabit, should of course be at the very heart of a study of subaltern politics. Accordingly, what I have tried to do in my analysis of the interview data is to try and decipher significant themes in activist narratives—significant themes in accounts of both oppression and resistance—and to reflect critically on what these themes tell us about what changes some of India's poorest, most excluded, and most violently stigmatised citizens want to see in their worlds and how they have tried to make such changes a reality.

This book has been almost a decade in the making. I could not have begun the journey towards its completion without the help of a number of activist friends in Madhya Pradesh. Rahul Banerjee spent many hours with me during the early summer of 2009 discussing the project, putting me in touch with former fellow activists in the KMCS, and taking me along as he travelled to Alirajpur to

conduct meetings. My conversations with Rahul were a constant source of insight and reflection—much of which is deposited in the following pages. Bijoy Panda facilitated my access to the AMS, and spent time with me in Indore, discussing politics late into the night. I am grateful for his support and his engagement with my project.

Most importantly, however, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Amit and Jayashree at Adharshila. If it had not been for their initiative, I doubt that the fieldwork that underpins this work would had been possible. It certainly would not have been carried out in such a meaningful and engaging manner. More than just collaborating on research, Amit and Jayashree, and their children Revali and Sarang, invited me into their home with open arms, fed me, hung out with me, and spent long hours sharing invaluable stories and many laughs with me. I am deeply grateful to them for all this, and to the research team from Adharshila—in particular Majeli, Shevanta, Suresh, and Prakash—for their tireless efforts and good companionship. I am thankful to all the activists of the KMCS and the AMS who patiently gave of their time and experiences, and who often welcomed me as a guest in their homes. I am particularly grateful to Shankar, Kemat and Mukesh for their generous hospitality and help during my fieldwork. Sunita and Sarika carried out extremely valuable work as research assistants—digging up valuable and sometimes obscure archival resources and facilitating the transcription of interviews. *Zindabad!*

In Indore, my big sister and big brother—Jaya Mehta and Vineet Tiwari—provided a home away from home, help and support, discussions and distractions, and, most importantly, the kind of committed friendship that truly nurtures the soul. I am extremely lucky that my research in India has led me into their lives and work and them into my life and my work. May it always remain so!

Several academic institutions in India have hosted me during the time when I researched and wrote this book. Neera Chandhoke welcomed me to the Developing Countries Research Centre at Delhi University in 2009–2010 and Amit Prakash and Niraja Gopal Jayal enabled me to spend time at the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance at Jawaharlal Nehru University during the autumn of 2015. I benefited greatly from both affiliations, and especially from discussions of a paper presenting some of the ideas contained in this book at CSLG in late 2015. Little did I know at that point that several of my hosts would soon be subjected to the stranglehold of the antidemocratic forces that currently hold power in India. I extend my solidarity to them and the struggles they are currently engaged in—*Nijaat deeda o dil ki ghadi nahin aai/Chaley chalo ke wo manzil abhi nahin aai.*

During the time that I have been working on this book, I have spent two periods as a visiting fellow at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The CPCP is a unique space

of insurgent scholarship, and a precious site of engaged learning. I cherish the time I have been able to spend there. I extend my most heartfelt thanks to David Harvey, Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, and Peter Hitchcock—hosts extraordinaires, mentors, inspirations, friends, and intellectual comrades.

The arguments and perspectives in this book have benefited from discussions with and critical readings by many friends and colleagues across the globe. I would particularly like to thank John Harriss, Ajantha Subramanian, Adam Morton, Ravinder Kaur, Jeff Witsoe, Sanjay Ruparelia, Nandini Sundar, Partha Chatterjee, John Krinsky, Jeff Goodwin, Colin Barker, Manali Desai, Luisa Steur, David Arnold, Andreas Bieler, Christina Heatherton, Prakash Kashwan, Jackie Cock, Alpa Shah, Jim Jasper, Sanjib Baruah, Brian Jones, Ajay Skaria, Dilip Menon, Beppe Karlsson, Aparna Sundar, Gayatri Menon, Ujju Aggarwal, Carlota McAllister, and Subir Sinha for their generous engagement over the years. I have also drawn intellectual sustenance from presenting papers at the South Asia Institute at Harvard University, the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa and the Society, Work and Development Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, the UCLA Center for India and South Asia, the Center for South Asia at Stanford University, the Unit for Humanities at Rhodes University, the South Asia Studies Colloquium at Yale University, the Human Rights Institute at the University of Connecticut, the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape and the Department of Sociology at the University of Cape Town, the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham, the CUNY Politics and Protest Workshop, the CPCP weekly seminar at the CUNY Grad Center, the Center for Global South Asian Studies at the University of Copenhagen, and the Department of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. While I worked on this book, I had the great pleasure of supervising the doctoral work of Mercedes Biocca. Our discussions over the years have pushed my thinking in important ways—*gracias compañera!* Ole Johnny Olsen has been there since I took my academic baby steps. I am glad he was there during the writing of this book too—his friendship, advice, and kind generosity mean a lot to me.

At my current institutional home at the Department of Global Development and Planning at the University of Agder, I have benefitted greatly from my conversations with Jonathan Baker—one of my first and most important teachers. From 2014 to 2017, I was very fortunate to work alongside Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anand Vaidya. Our discussions—which have somehow tended to take place in New York City and Grimstad, always with good beer within reach and sometimes with freshly foraged oysters—and their critical readings of draft chapters have enabled me to both enhance the arguments I put forward in this book, and to deepen my understanding of subaltern politics and postcolonial democracy in India more generally. Laurence Cox has not only read the draft manuscript from

beginning to end and offered comments that have enabled me to steer clear of several analytical pitfalls, but has also been a steadfast friend of the first order and remains the one who has the most to teach me about how to think about social movements in ways that actually matter.

I am very grateful to Partha Chatterjee for his interest in this book. Needless to say, his support for this project is an expression of an intellectual generosity that is all too rare in the academy. At Cambridge University Press, it has been an absolute pleasure to work with Qudsiya Ahmed. I am thankful to the two anonymous readers of the manuscript, whose comments enabled me to sharpen key arguments in the text.

This book is for Srila—because I carry her heart in my heart, and she carries mine in hers.

Colombo, January 2018

Map 1 Western India

Source: Map drawn by Annita Lucchesi.

Note: Map not to scale and does not represent authentic international boundaries.

Map 2 The Bhil Heartland of Western India

Source: Map drawn by Annita Lucchesi.

Note: Map not to scale and does not represent authentic international boundaries.

1

Introduction

'*Rozgaar guarantee amra kanoon che!*—the employment guarantee is our law!' This is a common refrain among activists of the Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS), a local movement of Adivasis and Dalits in Badwani district in western Madhya Pradesh (Nayak 2008). The statement is remarkable in many respects, not least because it represents a distinct reversal of the entrenched disenfranchisement that has characterised Adivasi relations to the state in the western districts of Madhya Pradesh.[1] As the narrative in this book will show, it also expresses how claims for citizenship mediated by the law have been instrumental in animating this reversal. Indeed, one of JADS' main achievements over the years has been to secure accountability and efficiency in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in Pati block of Badwani district.[2]

Ever since the NREGA was introduced in early 2006, JADS activists have confronted the local administration to ensure transparent and effective implementation of the programme—making sure, for example, that job cards are issued, that written applications for work are accepted by the administration, and that the minimum wage is in fact paid. Initially in 2006, state authorities

[1] As the next chapter will make clear, I use the term 'disenfranchisement' not in a *de jure* sense—Adivasis are of course formally fully enfranchised citizens of India—but to point to the *de facto* absence of rights, participation, and entitlement that characterises state–society relations in the Bhil areas of western Madhya Pradesh.

[2] The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (NREGA, later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) is a law that aims to guarantee the right to work for poor households in rural India. Under the provisions of the law, 100 days of wage employment is guaranteed per financial year to all households whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. See Chopra (2011a, 2011b) for a perspective on the making of the law and Roy (2014) for an interesting argument about the workings of the NREGA in relation to subaltern politics.

refused to implement work schemes under the NREGA. Consequently, JADS demanded that an unemployment allowance should be given to people who would otherwise have been able to find work under the NREGA. A long and passionate agitation followed, in which activists faced threats of violence and trumped-up criminal cases. Lasting from June to October 2006, the struggle ultimately succeeded in forcing the authorities to pay unemployment allowances to 1,500–2,000 applicants. In the following years, Pati block[3] attracted attention as one of the areas in India where the NREGA was being implemented with the highest level of success. A 2008 survey that covered ten districts across six Hindi-belt states showed that almost half the workers from Pati who had been interviewed had been able to obtain nearly 100 days of employment through the programme, and on average workers from Pati block had secured 85 days of work under NREGA in the 12 months preceding the survey. This compared very favourably with results from the other states, where the average number of work-days obtained under the scheme numbered a mere 43, and only 14 per cent of all interviewed workers had managed to secure a full 100 days of work under the scheme. The incomes that JADS activists obtain from NREGA have been put to good use in securing necessities like food, seeds, and clothing. Moreover, increased incomes have enabled people to improve the quality of agriculture in the villages; at the same time migration to urban centres to find work during the lean season has decreased. Even more significantly, the experience of engaging successfully with the state over the implementation of NREGA has created a sense of empowerment and entitlement in local communities in the area (see Nayak 2012, 2016).

However, these victories were not easily won. Not only was the JADS up against a state apparatus that was loath to pay heed to Adivasi demands, they also challenged elites who were not averse to resorting to repression when confronted with democratic mass mobilisation. This became abundantly clear in early May 2012, when a 'show cause' notice was issued to Madhuri Krishnaswamy, a leading JADS activist.[4] In the notice, Madhuriben, as she

[3] A block is an administrative sub-division below the district level.

[4] Madhuri Krishnaswamy is one of many non-tribal, urban middle class activists who have been involved as leading activists with local Adivasi organisations across western India. Krishnaswamy started her career as an activist in the region in the early 1990s, when she joined the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, before moving on in the late 1990s to found JADS as an organisation operating in Badwani district. See Nayak (2012) for a rich and insightful analysis of JADS and its activism.

is known in local communities in the district, was called upon by the District Magistrate to provide reasons as to why she should not be externed from Badwani and six other districts of the state.[5] The reason why the authorities wanted to extern Madhuriben was that she and her organisation had allegedly hindered 'the development work of the administration' and created 'an atmosphere of fear among the government functionaries' engaged in the implementation of this work (see Singh 2012a; Ghatwai 2012; AHRC 2012).

This move by the Badwani administration was decried by leading national civil society activists like Jean Drèze and Aruna Roy as an unconstitutional attempt at silencing an activist who had dared to challenge the local administration.[6] It soon emerged that of the criminal cases listed in the notice to justify Madhuriben's externment, all but one were old cases in which JADS activists had been acquitted of all allegations. The remaining case had not even made it to the courts at the time the notice was issued. Valsingh, an Adivasi activist from JADS, drew a parallel to past and less democratic times in India: 'This reminds us of British times. Is the government scared to face us? It is our constitutional right to organise and agitate and it cannot be taken away by the collector' (Singh 2012a).

Responding to the allegations made against her, Madhuriben pointed out: 'Far from "obstructing" government schemes our campaigns and protests have been for the proper implementation of these schemes according to law.' In doing so, she argued, JADS had upset the powers that be in the area: 'These interests have been made very uncomfortable by an adivasi population that is confident, aware, organised, and very vocal in demanding their legal rights' (Krishnaswamy 2012).

Ultimately, the attempt to drive Madhuriben out of Badwani district foundered—in part due to extensive national and international criticism of the Badwani administration. However, a year later, the district administration struck again. Along with four other activists, Madhuriben was summoned to the offices of the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) of Badwani in connection

[5] Externment is a form of punishment in which a person or a group are banished from a specific area—a district, several districts, or a state for example—for a defined period of time.

[6] Indeed, even Jairam Ramesh, Union Minister for Rural Development at the time, wrote to the Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh expressing his concern over what he referred to as an 'extreme step' taken against an activist and an organisation that were operating entirely within the parameters of the Indian constitution (Singh 2012b).

with a case from 2008, in which she and other activists had been accused of rioting and assaulting a public servant. The case had been filed after JADS had protested severe negligence at a local primary health centre.[7] Although local police had rejected the case due to lack of evidence, the Badwani CJM refused to accept this and ordered that the case should to go to trial. As she initially refused to take bail, Madhuri was jailed for two weeks. However, once again the attempt at repression failed, and she was released from prison. 'Almost every JADS protest and campaign has been accompanied by false police cases, even though they are always completely peaceful and disciplined', Madhuri pointed out after her release. 'Most campaigns have been for clear legal rights and entitlements. The main reason for this harassment has been not so much the protests themselves as because the politician-trader-bureaucracy nexus has felt threatened by Adivasi self-assertion and unity' (Krishnaswamy 2013).

The events that unfolded in Badwani district between May 2012 and May 2013, and the processes from which these events resulted, illustrate the political dynamics that are the key concern of this book. On the one hand, processes of democratic deepening are set in train when subaltern groups stake rights-based claims in relation to a state that is often not only unaccountable and unresponsive but also predatory and violent in its everyday workings among the poor. On the other hand, dominant groups mobilise the coercive resources of the state in order to curb the inroads made by subaltern claims-making. In this way they seek to reproduce existing relations of power in specific locales. These complex processes of negotiation, contestation, and struggle animate a contentious dialectic of power and resistance that is integral to shaping the political economy of democracy and development in contemporary India.

New forms of subaltern politics in India mobilise a wide variety of groups—for example, Dalits (Gorringe 2005, 2017; Waghmore 2013), poor rural women

[7] In early November 2008, a young Adivasi woman, Baniya Bai, was taken to the primary health centre (PHC) in Medimata for her first delivery. After a journey of 15 kilometres by bullock cart, she and her family were met by the compounder and a nurse, who allegedly demanded a bribe of Rs 100 to aid in the delivery of her child. Being unable to pay this bribe, Baniya Bai and her parents-in-law were thrown out of the PHC, and she ended up delivering her child on the road outside the PHC with the assistance of a traditional Adivasi midwife (Srivastava 2013). Such cases of neglect and corruption are common in the district, and directly related to the deaths of 28 women during delivery in 2008 alone (Subha, Sarojini, and Khanna 2012).

(Sharma 2008; Madhok 2013), informal sector workers (Agarwala 2013; Nair 2017), and lower caste peasants (Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2008; Witsoe 2013)—and have destabilised important structures of power that for a long time underpinned the political economy of the postcolonial state (see Corbridge and Harriss 2000: chapter 9). In recent years, these gains have manifested themselves in the introduction of rights-based legislation—the NREGA being a case in point (Ruparelia 2013). The considerable advances made by a local social movement such as JADS in terms of ensuring the implementation of the NREGA suggests that rights-based legislation has 'reconfigured not only material interactions between the state and India's marginalised, but also the imagined spaces within which marginal groups renegotiate their relationships with the state' (Williams, Vira, and Chopra 2011: 12). However, there is nevertheless something partial and limited about the impact of these mobilising processes.

This is above all evidenced by the way in which the Indian economy is defined by a sociodemographic pattern in which Dalits, Adivasis, women, small and marginal peasants, and landless and informal sector workers remain systematically overrepresented among the 660 million people who live in poverty in the country today (see Kohli 2012; Sen and Drèze 2013; Corbridge and Shah 2013; Walker 2008; Breman 2016; Gooptu and Parry 2014).[8] This pattern combines with ever-widening inequalities to testify to how subaltern groups remain adversely incorporated into power relations that perpetuate uneven and unequal development in India today (Jayadev, Motiram, and Vakulabharanam 2011). It is therefore necessary to ask critical questions about the ways in which poorer and less powerful groups can effectively challenge their relegation to the bottom of economic and political hierarchies by using strategies that rely on the institutions, the languages and idioms, and the procedures and interventions of the Indian state.

This book does precisely this by deciphering how subalternity is both constituted and contested in and through state formation as a 'hegemonic process' (Mallon 1995: 6). The empirical reference point is the region that I refer to as the Bhil heartland—that is, the districts of northwestern Maharashtra, southeastern Gujarat, southern Rajasthan, and western Madhya Pradesh

[8] According to the most recent India country briefing from the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 46.3 per cent of India's 1.23 billion strong population lives in poverty (OPHDI 2017).

that are home to the vast majority of India's Bhil Adivasis.[9] As I show in the following chapter, this Bhil heartland is plagued by severe and chronic poverty, and material deprivation has in turn been entrenched by the disenfranchisement of Adivasi communities within local state–society relations. However, as the example of JADS suggests, deprivation and subordination have not gone unchallenged. Starting in eastern Maharashtra with Shramik Sangathana and Bhoomi Sena in the early 1970s and Kashtakari Sangathana in the late 1970s, the region has witnessed the emergence of local social movements in Adivasi communities that have contested oppression by the local state and vindicated the legitimacy of tribal rights to land and forests.[10]

This study concentrates on two local movements that emerged in western Madhya Pradesh in the 1980s and 1990s—the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS) in what is now Alirajpur district and the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) in what are now Khargone and Badwani districts.[11] As with their predecessors in eastern Maharashtra, these *sangathan*s[12] registered some significant achievements in terms of curbing the excesses of a notoriously high-handed state and fostering a political culture of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 2008) among the Bhil communities in the area.

However, another salient feature of this arc of resistance is the mobilisation of coercion by state authorities to curb the growth of these movements in conjunctures when they have gathered enough momentum to threaten regional

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[9] The Bhils are one of the major Adivasi groups of western and central India. Consisting of multiple sub-groups such as Bhilalas, Barelas, and Naiks, the Bhils inhabit the largely hilly regions of northwestern Maharashtra, eastern Gujarat, southern Rajasthan, and western Madhya Pradesh. For the sake of simplicity, I shall use the term 'Bhil Adivasis' to refer to Bhils, Bhilalas, and Barelas in this book.

[10] See Kulkarni (1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1979), Mies (1986), Basu (1990), Kashtakari Sangathana (1986), and de Silva, Mehta, Rahman and Wignaraja (1979) for accounts of these early movements in Maharashtra.

[11] When the KMCS started its activities in the early 1980s, Alirajpur was a *tehsil* (sub-district) of Jhabua district. It remained so until 2009, when it was carved out as a separate district. When the AMS began its operations in the 1990s, Badwani was part of Khargone district. It remained so until 1998, when it was constituted as a separate district.

[12] I emphasise the term *sangathan* here as it refers to a particular political form—the local, democratic grassroots organisation—that became prominent in rural India during the 1970s, particularly in the wake of the JP movement and the Emergency (1975–1977) (see Kamat 2002).

elites and their hold on the levers of political power. In order to understand these dynamics, my analysis fuses an ethnographic attentiveness to the micro-politics of local state–society relations—that is, the power-laden nature of everyday interaction and contention between subaltern groups and the institutions and personnel of the local state—with a historical orientation towards the political economy of regional and national state-formation. In doing so, I hope to develop a politically enabling analysis of these trajectories of mobilisation that can contribute to ongoing discussions about the prospects for emancipatory change and democratic deepening in contemporary India.

Theoretical Orientations[13]

According to Partha Chatterjee—one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies project and a leading theorist of political modernity in the postcolony—state–society relations in India have undergone a sea-change in recent times:

> … the spread of governmental technologies in India in the last three decades, as a result of the deepening reach of the developmental state under conditions of electoral democracy, has meant that the state is no longer an external entity to the peasant community … Not only are peasants dependent on state agencies for [theirs] services, they have also acquired considerable skill, albeit to a different degree in different regions, in manipulating and pressurising these agencies to deliver these benefits. Institutions of the state, or at least governmental agencies (whether state or non-state), have become internal aspects of the peasant community. (Chatterjee 2008: 54)

The significance of Chatterjee's statement has to be gauged and understood in relation to how he and other members of the Subaltern Studies project conceived of state–society relations in colonial and postcolonial India.

Extending Ranajit Guha's (1982a: 4) paradigmatic argument that the politics of subaltern groups in colonial India constituted an 'autonomous domain' that was separate from and independent of 'elite politics', leading figures in the Subaltern Studies project developed a conceptual narrative in which the state has persistently existed at a distance from subaltern lifeworlds.[14] According

[13] This section draws on a more extensive argument developed in Nilsen (2015a).

[14] Guha (1982a, 1982b) defined the subaltern rather loosely as that part of the population—the working classes, peasantry, and subordinate classes—who were not

to this perspective, the precolonial state was manifest as 'a distant, formally all-encompassing empire' that commanded ceremonial deference from its subjects but had little capacity for actually intervening in their livelihoods and communities (Kaviraj 2010: 12). The colonial state, Guha (1997: 64) famously argued, 'failed to generate a hegemonic ruling culture' and existed only as 'an *absolute externality*' which provided 'no space for transactions between the will of the rulers and that of the ruled' (ibid: 65). Consequently, the colonial state 'remained an entity which is not organic to the familiar sphere of everyday social activity' (Chatterjee 1982: 32). And, ultimately, the postcolonial state failed to overcome this schism: the Indian nationalist movement was not capable of translating the modern political vocabulary of democracy into a meaningful vernacular language (see Kaviraj 2010; Chatterjee 1986). With the coming of independence in 1947, this marginalisation came to be 'written as the state–society relation', as India's new ruling elite 'could not create its own hegemony, or create a dialogic relation with the subaltern classes' (Kaviraj 2010: 23, 81).

So when Chatterjee (2012a: 132) in his recent work notes that poor people in rural India now regularly press claims and demands on the state and in doing so 'learn how to operate the levers of governmental systems', this is indeed a significant analytical departure. Arguably, this departure was foreshadowed in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments*, in which he pointed out a tenuous rapprochement between elite politics and subaltern politics (see Chatterjee 1993). However, it only comes fully to fruition with his more recent work on 'the politics of the governed' (Chatterjee 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012). Central to the perspective he develops in this work is the claim that in order to understand how subaltern groups in contemporary India engage with the state, it is necessary to distinguish between 'civil society' and 'political society'.

The former is a political space where the liberal precept of citizenship reigns, and which is inhabited by India's elites. By contrast, the latter is a political space constituted by the governmental technologies—that is, the demographic categories and bureaucratic interventions—that the state uses to target specific population groups with development and welfare policies. It is in this space that

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part of the elite. Subalternity was then defined in relation to identity, as being based on 'class, caste, age, gender and office' (1982a: 7) and placed in binary opposition to the elite. See Roosa (2006) for a particularly sharp criticism of Guha's 'structuralist populism' and Nilsen and Roy (2015) for an extended discussion of the various ways in which the terms 'subaltern' and 'subalternity' have been deployed and developed in the Subaltern Studies project.