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Migration and Rootedness in context of Adivasi resistance against Mining in Orissa

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Abstract

The debate on rootedness of Adivasi to their lands has generated a long line of productive enquiry. It is critiqued as ecological romanticism of the scholars and activists or considered a form of incarceration of the Adivasi. It is argued that the idea of rootedness tends to straitjacket Adivasi lives to a space and place disregarding their historical and contemporary realities of migration and marginalisation. Posing these questions in the context of Adivasi resistance and dispossession, reveal that experience of migration in the past and it contemporary forms directly feed into a complex, dense and collective understanding of rootedness, development, rights and notion of state sovereignty. This, I show, in context of Adivasi opposition to mining projects, lead to multilayered and even conflicting narratives that anti-dispossession movements have to contend with in order to construct the movement.

Introduction

In the longue duree of administrative archaeology and academic studies, rootedness, or Adivasi attachment to land has been considered as one of the key criterion to define Adivasi as a discrete population category and understand their culture and socio-economic lives. In fact, such understanding is manifest as 'everyday common sense' (Prasad 2011) and continues to inform analysis of Adivasi politics.

The intense environmental conflicts generated in the present form of development have the figure of Adivasi as leading from the front. An important aspect of this development is dispossession of Adivasis from their lands and forest resources. In this context, the argument of opposition of Adivasis to development projects due to severance of their organic tie with land finds immediate traction. It is suggested that Adivasi culture is based on the attachment to land and a sense of co-existence with the earth (Padel and Das 2010). Such singular emphasis on rootedness in understanding the dynamics of Adivasi societies, their culture and politics has been severally criticised. Such descriptions have been critiqued as 'ecological romanticism' (Prasad 2011), equated to 'romantic imagery' and 'production of an eco-incarceration' by activists and scholars (Shah 2010) (Also see, Prasad 2011, for an excellent and systematic critique on issues of cultural ecology and identity formation among the Adivasis along historical axis).

Problematising the idea of Adivasi rootedness, Shah (2010) has argued that the historical processes of migration of tribals in Jharkhand to other states and most recently to brick kilns in West Bengal shows that the notion of a primordial tribal attachment to land is an activist construct. More recently, in his study of Jharkhand Chandra (2016) has made similar observations showing how the Adivasi themselves do not like such descriptions as given by activists that assert a primary association with land and a politics that tends to pitch them as primitive and as occupying the 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2003).

In fact, historically, experience of many of the Adivasi communities is co-constituted by migration and farming. The political and social lives of the Adivasis are thus, situated in the interstices of this duality. But must we consider these as discrete contradictory aspects of Adivasi livelihoods? As some of the trenchant critique of development comes for some of these Adivasi communities facing fears of dispossession, it might be more productive to consider migration along with rootedness as a simultaneity rather than opposing aspects. This simultaneity could at once, be seen as productive of complex and layered understanding of sovereignty. In would also enable us to shed light on how forms of migration generate both ambiguity around ideas of attachment to land as well as generate a movement discourse in which lands are attached with intimate and emotional meaning. This discourse rests not

merely on the activistic articulation of attachment but engages persisting popular memories in which land and place, however, marginal and fragile have an enduring value. It is notable that laws upholding inalienable rights of Adivasi to their lands also affirm such articulation.

The context of Adivasi opposition to dispossession due to development projects, brings to the fore the many complexities that foreground the difficulties in constructing the movement against such projects. At the same time, experience of migration itself, enable sharpening of critique against development projects. In this paper, I suggest that migration exposes Adivasis to the core idea of development and sovereignty. This, in turn is generative of a certain ambiguity around Adivasi attachment to land as Adivasi communities witness and experience the nature, affect and outcomes to development projects elsewhere.

Through this paper, based on my PhD fieldwork which is ethnography of a resistance movement in Kashipur in Southern Orissa, where Adivasi villagers waged a protracted opposition to a mining company, I would thus attempt to make two points: histories of migration and its contemporary forms directly feed into a complex and collective understanding of rootedness, development and notion of state sovereignty, specifically so, in context of impending fears of dispossession; this understanding lead to formulation of a discursive hold-all that consist of contending opposing ideas. The complexity of narratives is furthered in context of formulation and granting of Constitutional rights of land. I show that anti-dispossession movements have to constantly contend with these frictional narratives in order to construct the movement and sustain it over any period of time. The next section foregrounds the context of the movement and a brief overview of the same.

1. Situating Adivasi resistance to mining project in Kashipur

In the mid-90s, villagers in Kashipur, situated in the southern Orissan district of Rayagada which is a Scheduled Area under Constitution, began to resist efforts of UAIL (Utkal Alumina International Limited), to mine one of their most venerated hills and displace over 24 villages them in the process (Memorandum of Understanding, Government of Orissa 1995). The Scheduled Areas are identified under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, which provides a framework for self-governance in Adivasi areas. The mining company that

proposed to set up a mining project in Kashipur was a consortium of three powerful multinational private mining companies: Norsk Hydro, Indal (the Indian subsidiary of ALCAN or Aluminium Company of Canada) and Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), and proposed to mine bauxite from the Baphlimali hills.

Villagers organised under the banner of Prakrutik Sampada Suraksha Parishad or PSSP (Council to Protect Natural Heritage) extensively mobilised others in the proposed refinery area (also called plant area) of the mining project. Local NGOs extended legal help and campaigned in support of PSSP, also taking its leaders and other villagers for exposure trips and seminars. Some social and political activists from other parts of Orissa were drawn to the area after learning that the local Adivasis and Dalits had on their own and with little outside political support organised themselves against the mining project. Initially, they came to attend public meetings and strategy development sessions; a few of them stayed on for longer periods and became closely involved in the mobilisation and organising work after 1997. During 1997-2004, local opposition to the mining company was so strong that the latter could not start any work in the area.

Presently, the collective opposition to the mining company has been thoroughly subdued. Instead, there is fractured resistance which is largely group based and often, in persuasion of private financial gain. In this paper, I would concentrate on the initial few years of the movement in order to focus on the reactions generated among the villagers when the information regarding the mining project became public, and how the activists articulated rootedness in the initial phase of the movement.

Till 2004, the company could not start any work, whether it was the construction of sample resettlement quarters or the development of a plant nursery or conducting CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programmes such as organising ‘eye camps’ for medical treatment or distributing fertiliser or vegetable seeds to the farmers. Villagers armed with axes physically attacked these works in the initial stage itself and chased away or, sometimes, took hostage the people associated with these works. Public meetings organised by the District administration were boycotted. Government works such as bridge construction that were seen as ways of facilitating the entry of the company into the area were damaged and the contractors were chased away with stern warnings not to return.

However, it should not be assumed that opposition to the company was widespread,instead what one found was that some villages and communities were more active in their opposition to the mining company than others. Throughout this period, both the local leaders and the outside activists had to grapple with the issue of lack of singular commitment of the villagers to resist the company. Whereas, there are multiple reasons as to as to why movement participant express different levels of interest or lack of it, relationship to land, expected benefits, local politics etc. are among the many reasons for such orientation (various studies have noted that differences between different social groups especially those shaped by land ownership and hierarchical notions of caste, introduce fault-lines into the movement [see, Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Nathan 1997; Sundar 1997, on hierarchies within Adivasi societies]). As mining prospects and opposition to it generate a very dynamic environment, sections of different groups also shifted their loyalties vis a vis the mining project over a period of time. I have discussed these aspects at length elsewhere (Dash 2016). For the purpose of the paper which has a narrow focus, I want to confine the analysis to the aspect of migration in context of livelihoods in the post independence period. I choose a narrow focus to specifically understand, how these factors enable a complex understanding of sovereignty to emerge that continued to inform and shape the contours of the movement as villagers opposed the UAIL mining project.

Padel and Das (2010), in context of the Adivasi resistance movement against bauxite mining project in Kashipur and neighbouring Niyamagiri hills note that the social lives and culture of the Adivasi, is rooted in their lands and any attempt to sever these ties would invite their opposition. Rootedness- defined as both relationship to land and attachment to it- however varies vastly both between and within social groups. This relationship is also overdetermined by evolving notions of sovereignty that are shaped by the historical experiences, contemporary forms of migration as well as the movement articulation of attachment to land. I also suggest that mining sites as it is are not isolated tracts but often part of a larger geography of mineral zones. Often, part of these zones were either historically subjected to mining or were areas where mining began after independence to meet the requirements of growing Indian economy so based on heavy industries. These areas as sites of employment, attracted labouring population from neighbouring areas to work as coolies or in other forms of unskilled labour, as we shall see. Being part of such development enclave, it can uniquely

shape experience of social groups and understanding of both development and sovereignty. Whereas, this exposure might rest as latent information, it can come to fore in context of impending fears of displacement due to mining project and in complex ways inform and shape a resultant understanding in the interstices of such experience, notions of sovereignty and movement discourse around rootedness. This process also reveal the ambiguity around attachment to land, understanding of development and problematise prevailing notions of sovereignty. For the purpose of this paper, ambiguity around attachment to land does not take into account landlessness among Adivasis and varied relations of different groups to land: both private and communally owned land.

In the next three sections, I would provide a glimpse these histories and experiences of migration of Adivasis from the area where the UAIL project was proposed to be set up, to other neighbouring development sites and the narratives and evolving notions of sovereignty it gave rise to in context of the proposed mining project in Kashipur.

1.1 The larger geography of dispossession and displacement

Kashipur is located within a region dotted with 'development projects' which have subjected historically and continuously to displacement and dispossession of the Adivasis and Dalits of those areas (see, Geological Survey of India 1994) The people in Kashipur had not merely been onlookers; they had experienced the effects of these processes when working as labourers in some of these project sites, visiting their kin in project-affected areas or, as in some cases, rehabilitating their dispossessed kin in their own villages. They thus, had a general understanding of the impacts of development projects on those displaced. This also shaped an understanding of state sovereignty as binding on populations.

About 120 Kilometers away from Kashipur, lie the NALCO (National Aluminium Company) refinery plant at Damanjodi in Koraput. It mines bauxite from Panchpatmali hills in Koraput. NALCO acquired lands in the 1970s and has been operating since. Next to it lies the HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) factory in Sunabeda that was commissioned in 1965. Over the years, a number of villagers from Kashipur have seasonally migrated to the NALCO refinery site and the HAL factory to work as unskilled labourers. Many also travelled down to these areas to visit their kin. In the last few decades, a pattern of migration in the form of contract labour, had also emerged in which gangs of people migrated for long periods with

non-tribal contractors to construction and industrial sites within Orissa and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh to work as labourers.

The upper Kolab dam was constructed through the 1980s. It is located near Kashipur. It also attracted labourers from a wider area including Kashipur. It was constructed to supply water and electricity to the Damanjodi refinery of NALCO. The project displaced 16,000 people from about 60 villages (Nayak 2007).

In close vicinity of Kashipur lies the Indravati project, commissioned in 1978, under which four dams were built across the river to construct the Indravati reservoir. [1] Over 65 villages were submerged due to the reservoir (Garg 1998; Pandey 1998). Many evictees from the Indravati project who had extended kin in Kashipur came here and settled in some of its villages. A large number of people from here migrated to Nowrangpur and Umerkote to settle down (Mohapatra and Mohapatro 1997). It is popular knowledge in Kashipur that the evictees of the project were loaded into trucks with little belongings and dumped in Umerkote and other places in Koraput. The government had not taken any responsibility to rehabilitate them or showed any concern for their futures.

Thus, villagers in Kashipur encountered industrial capitalism: primarily in the form of witnessing displacement and dispossession as they migrated to these areas for wage labour in the context of land alienation and resource degradation. Interestingly, when information regarding the UAIL project became public in the Kashipur project area in 1993-1994, there were divergent responses to the project. Whereas, the reasons of such responses were many as I have pointed out in the earlier section, I would like to draw attention to notions of sovereignty as held by the villagers as an important reason to respond with little reaction in the initial stage. Most of the villages remained mute spectators although a few vehemently opposed the land survey. Some of the Adivasis threw itching powder on the surveyors. Few villagers went off to adjoining Nowrangpur district in order to find new lands to settle down. In fact, some of them had identified lands where they could migrate to settle down after displacement from the mining project. It is notable that some people had made up their minds to leave the area as 'governments decision could not be challenged' (*sarkar jadi sthria kala, mani eka heba*).

[1] www.ohpcltd.com /indravati/index.asp?type=index. Accessed on 8 September 2012.

Noting this sense of helplessness when they learnt about the mining project, Aarta Majhi told me,

> It's not that we did not know what would happen, if a big mining company came here. We would all lose our lands and would be forced to leave the area. We have seen what had happened in Damanjodi and Sunabeda. You can still see what happened to those who were displaced in Indrawati. But what can one do? If the government takes a decision, we have to accept it. So we thought that it's best to find lands elsewhere and go away when such a situation would arise.[2]

State sovereignty in context of resource grab and dispossession from land was thus, considered unchallengeable by many. There were however, also those who opposed the project tooth and nail. They maintained that their hard-earned lands could not be forsaken or alienated to anybody. The people in the region were also familiar with the outcomes of land acquisition in neighboring Damanjodi and Sunabeda, where Adivasi where dispossessed due to mining projects At the same time, as mentioned they also tried to chase away the surveyors from the area by attacking them and their settlements. One of the elderly women, who had once threw itching powder on the surveyors told me that she could not bear outsiders on lands that belonged to her forefather's. The land did not belong to the government but to her. Contradictory responses including opposition and succumbing to the mining project show that historical experiences and information that shape the ideas of state sovereignty are not absolute. These also point towards the ambiguity around notion of Adivasi 'attachment to land'.

1.2 Dispossession outcomes and Activist articulation of rootedness

The exposure of the villagers from Kashipur, who went to Damanjodi or Sunabeda project areas to visit their kin or work as labourers, brought them face to face with the reality that many of the Adivasi on whose villages and lands the aluminium company was constructed, had either migrated elsewhere or else, they lived in poorly built shacks where they were rehabilitated as in the axe of NALCO Damanjodi. Most of these persons either worked as labourers on the company site or just loitered around.

Jaga Majhi noted to me,

[2] Aarta Majhi, Interview 8 October 2010.

> Those who gave up everything for the company lived like dogs in unhygienic conditions. They did not live well and lived without respect. Some even did not have enough to eat. They were not happy and their cultural practices were so different from ours. Imagine, They did not celebrate the traditional festivals that we do. Many ill habits had crept into their lives. The men drank a lot. They had lost the rhythm of life. It was so difficult to even relate to them and their conversations.[3]

This understanding informs the larger context in which the duality of responses of the Adivasi to the mining project needs to be situated.

As such most of the villagers that I spoke to firmly believed that whereas the community lands belonged to the government in term of its final ownership, their private lands belonged to them. At the same time, even as the activists eloquently spoke about the organic attachment of the Adivasi to land and its inalienability, a large number of people were not sure that they could prevent the company if the government had 'decided' to give away their lands to the company. The notions of organic attachment as spoken of by the activists contested with the notions of sovereignty translated by the administrators as , all lands below 12 inches of soils belong to the state. So much so for the activist articulation, most of the 24 villages except two, accepted compensation fearing that they would lose their lands whether or not they accepted the compensation.

Of the various articulations to exhort the villagers to remain steadfast in their opposition to the mining project, one that struck a note was activists' emphasis that in the older times, those displaced could still find a place to settle down by clearing forest patches in new areas, which were not available anymore due to rising population. As noted above, over years, many groups of people from Kashipur had regularly migrated to forested areas in Nabarangpur district due to pressing issues of food security. Communities displaced by projects such as, NALCO, Damanjodi and Indravati Dam had also settled down there in the past (Mohapatra, and Mohapatro 1997). The activists argued that loss of farmland and village settlements due to the mining project would turn them all and the future generations into beggars as they would have nowhere to go. Like older times they might not be lucky to find virgin places to

[3] Jaga Majhi, Interviews, 12 October 2010.

live and earn a livelihood. They also emphasised that even during the 1980s when the workforce in these plants was big, uneducated people did not find any 'respectable work'. Maharaj Mahji noted that convincing the villagers that they were the rightful owners of the lands was the most challenging task for them as well as the most important to have collective opposition at all:

> 'If people went away to Nabarangpur or elsewhere fearing that government has sent a company… then how could there be a struggle? Every government official from the *Tehsildar,* Collector, police and officials had said in different ways that all the land belonged to the government. But there were also people who said that government was lying so as to take away the lands from them. Many said in these meetings that if the lands belonged to the government, how do they have land papers …. why the government took (land) cess from them?' [4]

The leaders asserted in these meetings that the lands were carved by their ancestors from wilderness. At the same time, I found many elderly persons, who challenged states sovereign rights over their lands. Many elderly explained to me that their ancestors had endured the cruelties of the Kalahandia kings who ruled this area before and during the British period to retain these lands. The villagers held that their ancestors cleared the wilderness to make agricultural land, a point often emphasised by the activists.

The state sovereignty was thus challenged by drawing from narratives of ancestors settling down in an uninhabitable-forested area and clearing it with arduous efforts, thus making them the original settlers. It is important to mention that in pre-Independence period the Adivasis were forced to temporarily migrate to district headquarters to provide various services to the Kalahandi Kings. Often the menfolk had to leave behind their families and migrate to serve in the farms, orchards, gardens, housekeeping, cattle rearing etc. (Cobden- Ramsay 1910). These works required the villagers to migrate to Kalahandi for months together. The activists emphasised this historical fact in the meetings on a regular basis.

[4] Maharaj Majhi, Interviews, 12 March2011; 21November 2011.

Commonly, I found, land was invoked not merely as an index of power relations but intimately informed the way in which people's frugal resources came to be valued – a house as a site of habitation, security and warmth of family and friends; a field as a site of productivity and sustenance; however insufficient, it was theirs- they were its owners. In fact, many considered contemporary form of migration both as an outcome of precarious of their livelihoods as well as a means to be able to hold onto their lands. Activist articulation thus highlighted the historical relationship of the Adivasi to their lands as more than having use and exchange value, no matter however fragile resource-base it was. They also brought critical attention to the fate of those dispossessed from their lands and their predicament in order to emotionally stir the participants into the movement.

1.3 Adivasi rootedness and Constitutional Rights

The villagers contested the claims of state over their lands terms of their natural rights and interpreted state actions through the lens of whether such action was just or unjust and morally wrong or right, rather than as citizenship rights or as inscribed in law. It is notable that during this time *Panchayati Raj* (Local self-governance) (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was passed by the Indian Government. This rightly bolstered the assertion of activists that their resistance against the company was rightful and their rights to land as legally upheld.[5] This also foregrounds the ambiguity regarding notion of Adivasi 'attachment to land', as groups of villagers at a point when the collective opposition was yet to take shape felt that they might have to pack up and leave in spite of their traditional claims on the lands. The ambiguity, I suggest, needs to be understood through the lens of their popular understanding of the absolute sovereign power of state as eminent – domain, as the agency which has rights to displace and dispossess for development. At the same time, the ambiguity continued to inform the co-existence of layered and conflictual ideas of attachment to land as derived from their natural and traditional rights and more recently, legal rights granted by PESA Act, and as their rights being subjected to states exercise of sovereign power to dispossess them.

The enactment of PESA by the government gave them confidence. This Act, is a clear mandate that the relationship of the Adivasi to their lands is inalienable. In a

[5] PESA Act extended the provisions of Part IX of the Indian Constitution relating to the Panchayats to the Scheduled Areas. It is a step towards participatory democracy in these area by giving rights to the villages over its resources, prevent land alienation, restore unlawfully alienated land and in the process, promote tribal self-governance.

scenario where the administrative officers continued to assert that only part of the surface soil belonged to individuals and everything below that belonged to the government, the PESA Act that bestowed inalienable rights to lands both private and communal, brought lot of confidence among the villagers.

The Act was presented as government's recognition of rights of Adivasis over their lands. It was also considered a victory for their fight against the company as they considered what the company was doing was 'illegal' and against the new rules of the government. It helped to recast the collective opposition as what O'Brien and Li (2006) have called 'rightful resistance' – that is, a form of contentious politics that operates near the boundary of authorised channels and appeals to elites' commitment to laws and policies.

However, even Constitutional provision by way of the PESA act had to contend with the dominant local narratives coming from the administration. This narrative compounded with an understanding of eminent domain as gathered from their experiences of migration weighted strongly against activist articulation and constitutional provision of PESA. This also lead to a layered understanding of state as sovereign. On one hand, the state proclaimed all Adivasi lands in the Scheduled Areas as belonging to the Adivasis with inalienable rights. On the other hand, the same lands were given away by the state to a mining company without any prior information to the Adivasis who would be dispossessed in the process. One thus, finds multiple narratives even contradictory ones that either uphold or undermine state sovereignty, sometimes simultaneously. These narratives emanated from various sources including, experience of migration, collective popular memories, Constitutional provisions and congealed in a frictional manner in construction of movement discourses.

Conclusion

In this paper, I posed questions of rootedness and experience of migration in the context of Adivasi resistance and dispossession to suggest that experience of migration in the past and it contemporary forms directly feed into a complex, dense and collective understanding of rootedness, development, rights and notion of state sovereignty. Experience of migration in a very decisive manner shapes the understanding of development that privileges resources over people.

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Interestingly, in a contradiction of sorts, rights conflict with the ideas of state sovereignty.This lead to a multilayered and even conflicting narratives that anti-dispossession movements have to contend with in order to construct the movement. The activists thus, do not merely construct, they build upon slices of social facts to generate a discourse that constantly contests the forces and ideas that might discourage Adivasis from resisting the mining company. This is not merely 'strategic' rather commonsensical to selectively render social facts to generate suitable emotions. In fact, the existence of multiple and contradictory discourses narratives allow the activists to emphasise some aspects over others to strengthen deep in the commitment of the resisting villagers. It will be unfair to activists to suggest that their self-learning from texts to context does not occur, as they themselves become part of the larger social dynamics and complex politics that are present Adivasi societies just like any other.

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