

# ICOA1714: Cultural landscape diaspora and multicultural community building

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## Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

**Session 3:** Recreating Ideas of Memory

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 14, 2017, 09:40 – 09:55

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**Abstract:** Palimpsest and 'ghost' have been an integral part of studies on cultural memory, erasure and its 'haunting'. Be it Jacques Derrida's use of 'spectral bodies' to analyse the 'phantomatic' in ideology or Foucault's unraveling of 'haunting' in his interview, "Film and Popular Memory," it is accepted that pieces of identity and memory remain as imprints that drive and influence the individual or the community experiencing such 'haunting.'

The Adivasi way of life is pluralistic, where each community has its own dynamic oral history, and allegorical understanding of their habitats. Their idea of the sacred, like the sarna, often heralds to spirits of their ancestors and derive the 'sacred' from the living history, their cultural identity from their life in the forests and now, with increasing loss of habitat (Jal, Jangal, Jameen), memory.

This research explores the nuances of the Adivasi identity and the ramifications of displacement on their collective memory by exploring a palimpsest of the Adivasi way of life as it survives and morphs, despite an era of displacement and erasure and as they struggle for acknowledgment and survival. While conflict ruptures familiar systems of living, cultural memory is a representative form that assists in attempts to recreate a past and foster reconciliation of 'identity' in the present.

Utilizing ethnographic studies of grassroots organizations, an analysis of contemporary Adivasi literature and individual interviews of Adivasis involved in the advocacy efforts in Bihar and Jharkhand, this research seeks to map the ways the Adivasis and the grass-root organizations negotiate the conflict-ridden landscape to evolve as a society even as they seek to legitimize, preserve and celebrate critical aspects of what is self-recognized (in their own literature) as a five thousand year-old 'othered' culture of India, often de-legitimized or alienated in the face of the mainstream ideology of the time.

*Key words: adivasi, identity, conflict, reconciliation, human-rights-based, cultural memory, haunting*

## Adivasi Identity, Haunting and Reconciliation - Negotiating Cultural Memory and Displacement

### 1. Introduction

In his seminal work, *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs<sup>1</sup> posits that memory forms in reference to the existing surrounding society, whether at conception or when it is re-sought at a later moment. That is the recall of the memory, the remembering too, finds its form in and by, the context of that present. Jan Assman<sup>2</sup> described cultural memory as an institution - an “exteriorized and objectified” metonym between a “remembering minding and reminding object.” In contrast collective/ communicative memory, first raised by Halbwachs, is non-institutional, often constructed thematically and dependent on ties between groups, families and generations.

Both cultural memory and communicative memory are inherently tied to the idea of “identity.” This paper is an exploration of three categories of narratives around the Adivasi identity and diaspora, and explores the various ways Adivasi communities and aligned stakeholders are negotiating the ramifications of consistent cultural violence, displacement and erasure. It further explores the methods by which, despite a continued history of regional colonization<sup>3</sup> (as per subaltern studies), the Adivasi diaspora in the cities and Adivasi-aligned organizations seek to recreate their cultural memory through assigning metaphorical meaning to objects and creating channels of communication in order to reconstruct the collective memory and build pride within the Adivasi youth for their own identities and heritage.

### 2. Methodology

This research paper seeks to explore the literature, both global as well as by the Adivasis themselves to identify key stakeholders and narratives around Adivasi identities. It seeks to collect narratives through thirty formal and numerous other informal interviews of members of the Adivasi communities, grass-root organizations, activists, local government officials and members of the intellectual community working on this issue. Site visits to tribal villages, and having individual interviews with residents, general conversations and witnessing various *sabhas* or meetings, festivals or events, and insights from parallel research that looked at ethnographic case-studies of grassroots organizations and right-holder organizations who have been working with the tribes initially as a part of the Jharkhand movement, and now as advocates for the Adivasi cause and bring in resources and attention to stop human-rights violations in the region. A few of them are actively helping shift the legal narrative and public discourse, while others are coordinating efforts to resist land grab and disenfranchisement of the Adivasi people. Most of the field work was concentrated in villages in Gumla, Singhbhum and Dhanbad districts, and therefore represented views of certain tribes only.

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<sup>1</sup> (Halbwachs, 1992), p. 38, Introduction

<sup>2</sup>Originalveröffentlichung in: Astrid Erll, AnsgarNünning (Hg.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, New York 2008, S. 109-118

<sup>3</sup> The concept of regional colonization in this case is contested, and it often raises counter-debates around questions of ethnocentrism and othering within the tribal narrative.

### 3. Understanding the Adivasis

Adivasis, etymologically could be translated to “First residents.” This term is used colloquially for the indigenous tribes of India. As of 2017, there are 705 tribes notified by the Government of India as Scheduled tribes in accordance with Articles 342 and 366 (25) of the Constitution of India (Government of India, 26 January 1950).<sup>4</sup> The 2011 census counted the tribal population of the country as 10.43 crores (104.3 million), approximately 8.6% of the total population. The rural-urban ratio is about 90 to 10. The tribal population is spread over all the 30 States/Union Territories of India. Madhya Pradesh has the largest number of total Scheduled Tribe population at 14.6%, followed by Maharashtra (10.1%), Odisha (9.2%), Rajasthan (8.9%), Gujarat (8.5%) and so on.

Etymologically the term “*diku*” stands for “the other people.” But across the last century, due to the nature of Adivasi interaction with the in-migrating population, the word now popularly denotes “the exploiter of the Adivasi people.”<sup>5</sup> This term establishes that the Adivasi view themselves separate/distinct from the mainstream population, and have distinct ways that they negotiate the rest of the world as a perceived threat.

#### 3.1 Displacement and Cultural Erasure in Adivasi Diaspora

In the last century, with increasing deforestation and industrialization of the tribal occupied areas, the tribal populations have seen substantial displacement. Industrial cities, coal mines, steel industries, all of which were seen as the engines of growth for the nation, were mostly planned and implemented on forests and rural places occupied by the indigenous tribal and peasant populations. Even after the formation of the State of Jharkhand, which was once hailed as a victory for the indigenous rights movement, the State government signed multiple MOUs<sup>6</sup> with various industries and institutions. These initiatives are popular in the mainstream population as they will help bring in more middle-class jobs and better infrastructure and institutions to the State. But the large tracts of land promised to these initiatives will exacerbate the continuing erasure by superimposing urban settlements on the natural landscapes familiar and held sacred by the Adivasi people.

The legal framing of land and forest rights, in most of the twentieth century, did not legally recognize the collective ownership or historic occupancy of these lands. Even until recently, the legal framing allows the various state governments to interpret the law as per their own agendas, accelerating the process of land grab and displacement.<sup>7</sup> These geopolitical processes, as well as enforced alternate systems have forced individuals from tribal communities to migrate to other places. The number of migrant households per 1000 in the Scheduled Tribe category has more than tripled for urban areas from 1993 to 2008, rising from 29 to 62 per 1000.<sup>8</sup>

This displacement from community and destruction of place has led to a disconnection of cultural memory, and the rupture of intergenerational bonds have led to the weakening of the communicative

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<sup>4</sup> (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013), p. 353

<sup>5</sup>*Niku*- Adivasi terminology for kin

<sup>6</sup>[www.bloombergquint.com/business/2017/02/17/jharkhand-signs-209-mous-worth-rs-3-lakh-crore-in-investment-summit](http://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2017/02/17/jharkhand-signs-209-mous-worth-rs-3-lakh-crore-in-investment-summit)

<sup>7</sup>Sundar, Nandini. (2009). "Framing the Political Imagination." In *Legal Grounds*, by Nandini Sundar, p.189. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup>(Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013) p.266

memory, manufacturing a deep sense of inferiority amongst the Adivasi youth, reinforced by the larger blanket narrative ‘uncivilized’ Adivasi communities.

### **3.2 Jharkhand Movement, Structural Conflict and Criminalization**

According to Jewitt (2008)<sup>9</sup>, the key to understanding the underlying conflict in the Adivasi belts of India lies in understanding, not only the socio-economics, but also the ethical and aspirational conflict within two competing societal structures that form the current-day India. The Adivasi struggle for identity and self-rule dates back to several centuries, but it was predicated on identity and autonomy in the early twentieth century.

The first noted political activism for tribal autonomy was the formation of Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938. Scholars of Adivasi politics also suggest that the indigenous insistence of a state with a cultural area of Jharkhand can be attributed to the persistence of collective memory of an ancestral homeland.<sup>10</sup> Since then, the movement saw a turbulent history, including the armed Naxalite movement in 1960s, and was met with uncompromising suppression by the Indian state. Since then, there has been cyclical rise and fall of advocacy based movements for Adivasi autonomy and armed resistance against the “tyranny” of the Indian state. The failure of Jharkhand state to meet its popular mandate saw a resurgence of armed resistance in 2008, which was dealt with via Operation Greenhunt.

The dominant perception about tribal movements across India is that extremist factions are waging a civil war within the country, and jeopardizing national integrity and security by fooling the tribal population and propagating factionalism. The armed uprisings of the tribal populations have placed them under intense state surveillance - leading to multitudes unconstitutional incarcerations and suppression of any protest in these regions. The criminalization of the Adivasi youth, by conflating any protestation with “anti-national” Maoist activities have only reinforced the experience of alienation and brutality.

### **4. Adivasi Diaspora - Perspectives on Identity and Haunting**

Cultural erasure is a practice in which a dominant attempts to negate, suppress, demean and, in effect, erase the culture of another community or people. The recurrent themes of animism, guidance or haunting by ancestral spirits and mysticism, in Sarna and indigenous oral histories- find expressions in continued Adivasi resistance to assimilation. This haunting has found expression in Adivasi music, literature and grassroots arts - lamenting the loss and absence. The aligned literary and artistic pieces like “The Adivasi Will Not Dance<sup>11</sup>,” become mouthpieces to this collective anguish. For example, in his anguished monologue, Santhal farmer and musician Mangal Murmu refrains,

“Was a farmer. Was a farmer is right. Because I don’t farm anymore. In my village of Matiajore in Amrapara block of the Pakur district, not many Santhals farm anymore. Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by a mining company.” (170-71)

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<sup>9</sup>Jewitt, Sarah. 2008. "Political ecology of Jharkhand conflicts." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 49, , No. 1 pp68–82.

<sup>10</sup>Munda, R. D., and S BosuMullik. 2003. *The Jharkhand Movement - Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India*. Copenhagen: IWGIA, BIRSA.

<sup>11</sup>Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Adivasi Won't Dance*, 2016.

The book saw a massive push back on how it portrayed the Santhals, especially because of its portrayal of Santhali women, which would be seen as re-establishing in mainstream, the image of indigenous women as promiscuous - except that the narrative has more complexity than the mainstream gendered sexual standards might conceive.

The conversations around Adivasi identity, diaspora and cultural heritage led to multiple passionate viewpoints during our interviews and group discussions. Most of these views were passionately espoused and they have informed actions by various groups of actors. Though no individual viewpoint was completely aligned with another, the groups and narratives listed below form the major divergent streams of perspectives amongst the various actors.

#### **a) Activists for Indigenocracy**

The grassroots organizations working for the Adivasi cause have identified prevalent low self-esteem<sup>12</sup> amongst tribal populations as well as the perceived notion of “backwardness” that has resulted in mainstream apathy towards tribal way of life. Jharkhand is home to languages from three major families - the Munda languages (Australia/ Asiatic) which include Santhali, Mundari, Ho, Hindi Kharia and Bhumij; the Dravidian languages which include Oraon (Kurukh), Korwa and Pahari (Malto) and the Indo-Aryan (Indo-European) languages which include Nagpuri, Sadri, Khortha, Kurmali, Oriya, Bengali and Hindi.<sup>13</sup> Each of the individual tribes have oral histories, governance systems, knowledge systems and ways of communal living that are poised to be erased with this continued apathy. Some organizations are attempting to combat this by attempting to rekindle a sense of cultural belonging by organizing communal festivities that celebrate the Adivasi identity, as explained by PK, an Adivasi activist:

“The annual *Hulas* is a large celebration and congregation of the Adivasi people. Our NGO first came up with the idea and we secured funding and organized the function. After the first success, the community claimed it for themselves and has had *Hulas* melas annually. The community collects funds from every household and puts together a collective function, where the best talents in traditional Adivasi music, dance and art showcase themselves and compete amongst tribes. These inter-tribal functions also allow the members of every tribe to congregate and discuss their situation.”<sup>14</sup>

Others seek to document oral histories in publications and films for posterity - so that if and even after all Adivasis have assimilated to the mainstream, and the last generation of those who have been trained in oral histories are gone, these documents can provide a glimpse of what it meant to be an Adivasi and how their way of life, world view, social structure, governance and economic systems, relationship with nature and overall culture was distinct, from the dominant culture. They also seek to create a bridge for the dominant culture, so that they may educate themselves about the Adivasi culture and act as advocates for the same.<sup>15</sup>

Another strategy that NGOs used was to create *Lokpathshala* or people’s school that combines aspects of Adivasi way of life with mainstream education. These pathshalas or schools leverage the public structures like the school or the panchayat administrative building and use them as points to congregate and share communal knowledge and traditions. They also added ‘tribal/ community library’ to the existing

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.notprimitive.in/>

<sup>13</sup> NGO J handouts on grassroots advocacy and those it prints for education are in Adivasi languages and target the Adivasi youth so as to rebuild a sense of pride in their culture.

<sup>14</sup> P. K, personal interview in Hindi by author. 2014. *Post Movement: Conversations with NGO workers* (June 7). Translated by author

<sup>15</sup> GRO B documentation of Adivasi narratives, oral histories, folk-tales, poetry and songs. They target the Adivasi youth so as to rebuild a sense of pride in their culture.

infrastructure to collect and conserve the tribal memory. On the weekends or non-official school hours, the local elders gather to pass on their oral history and other traditions to the next generation.<sup>16</sup>

### **b) State and Developmentalists**

On the issue of how best to achieve development of Jharkhand, the state has definitely veered off the issue of tribal inclusion and has concentrated on development through industrialization and corporate appeasement. According to a human rights report published by the Jharkhand Human Rights Movement (JHRM), the state government of Jharkhand has so far signed 104 MOUs triggering massive resource grab in the region. The Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights report a total forced displacement of 6.54 million people in Jharkhand since independence. Other reports by human rights groups suggest that in the last decade, around 3 million (30 lakh) people have migrated from the state, of which 500,000 are women. According to a Delhi based research and advocacy centre, Indian Social Institute, in Delhi 54.78% girls and women migrated from Jharkhand are working as housemaids with many being forced into prostitution.<sup>17</sup>

### **c) The Subaltern, Urban Adivasi versus the Eco-incarcerated and Purified<sup>18</sup> Adivasi**

Both the subaltern urban Adivasi and eco-incarcerated Adivasi are literary constructs, each describing an Adivasi individual who has been affected by the geopolitics of displacement, development or conservation. The urban subaltern Adivasi has been identified by the NGOs as the individual displaced from the forest, and has been homogenized by the dominant culture, and while the spectre of his memories, his religion and the ideas of his home haunt him, he has little to no way to negotiate this sense of loss and connect to the diaspora of his people.

AlpaShah<sup>18</sup> argues that effect of the initiatives and discourses on indigeneity and activism have harmed the Adivasi communities by entrenching their identities to the past, instead of the future.

Huyssen (2003)<sup>19</sup> says of immigrants, "The more the diaspora and nation share the perception of loss, the more they both will insist on safeguarding identity and fortifying their borders, thus ossifying the past and closing themselves off to alternative futures."

## **5. Suggestions to Address Cultural Erasure and Conserve Collective Memory**

In the wake of the current situation - where the Adivasi way of life, as it has existed, is poised to die in the next two decades - we may ask 'what can be preserved to memory' and 'how can it be experientially made available to those displaced and disadvantaged by systemic processes. It is clear that the diaspora requires a more cohesive strategy to connect to their identity and collective memory, diverse as it is, while finding ways to negotiate life as migrant populations.

Indigenous communities in Canada and the Jewish and Tibetan diaspora have taken numerous steps to retain and transfer inter-generational knowledge and sense of belonging, for instance the Tibetan

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<sup>16</sup>This understanding is derived from the multiple handouts and posters that organizations like NGO S and NGO J have created to combat the threat of cultural extinction

<sup>17</sup>Toppo, Richard. 2012. Jharkhand: The failed promise of an adivasi state. July 12. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://infochangeindia.org/human-rights/analysis/jharkhand-the-failed-promise-of-an-adivasi-state.html>.

<sup>18</sup>Shah, A. (2010). *In the shadows of the state: indigenous politics, environmentalism, and insurgency in Jharkhand, India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>19</sup>Huyssen, A. (2003). Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts. *New German Critique*, Winter(88), 147-164.

Children's Villages. Continuous cultural education that integrates tribal worldviews and mainstream education is an important way to retain the cultural diaspora. Conservationists should also look at ethnographic studies of existing tribes and video documentation of their way of life. But most importantly, the plight of the Adivasi diaspora should be acknowledged and considered by the mainstream society and the nation as a whole as well the global community and a large scale initiative should be launched by National and Global cultural institutions to administer a more cohesive and scaled-up effort.

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# ICOA1720: IDENTITÉ, HANTISE ET RÉCONCILIATION DES ADIVASIS - NÉGOCIER LA MÉMOIRE ET LE DÉPLACEMENT CULTURELS

## Sous-thème 02: Le rôle du patrimoine culturel dans la construction de la paix et de la réconciliation

**Session 3:** Recréer des idées de mémoire

**Lieu:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 14 Décembre, 2017, 09:40 – 09:55

**Auteur:** Taru, Rashmi Gajare

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**Résumé:** Le «palimpseste» et le «fantôme» sont partie intégrante des études sur la mémoire culturelle, l'effacement et sa «hantise». Que ce soit l'utilisation de «corps spectraux» par Jacques Derrida pour analyser le «fantôme» dans l'idéologie ou le «fantôme» de Michel Foucault dans son interview «Film et mémoire populaire», il est admis que l'identité et la mémoire laissent des empreintes et influencent l'individu ou la communauté éprouvant une telle «hantise».

Le mode de vie des Adivasis est pluraliste : chaque communauté a sa propre histoire orale dynamique et sa propre interprétation allégorique de son habitat. Leur idée du sacré, comme *le sarna*, se réfère souvent aux esprits de leurs ancêtres et leur notion du sacré trouve ses sources dans l'histoire vivante, leur identité culturelle, leur vie dans les forêts et maintenant que leur habitat est en perdition croissante, (Jal, Jangal, Jameen), dans la mémoire.

Cette recherche explore les différentes nuances de l'identité Adivasi et ses ramifications dans la mémoire collective et analyse à la façon d'un palimpseste leur mode de vie tel qu'il survit et se métamorphose, au fil des déplacements, des disparitions et les luttes pour la reconnaissance et la survie. Alors que le conflit vient rompre les systèmes de vie familiers, la mémoire culturelle est une forme représentative qui aide à recréer un passé et à favoriser la réconciliation de «l'identité» dans le présent.

Cette recherche se fonde sur les études ethnographiques d'organisations locales, sur une analyse de la littérature Adivasi contemporaine ainsi que sur des interviews individuelles d'Adivasis impliqués dans leur défense au Bihar et au Jharkhand, pour cartographier la manière dont les Adivasis et les organisations locales négocient dans ce conflit et cherchent à évoluer en tant que société tout en préservant et célébrant (comme dans leur littérature) leur culture, vieille de cinq mille ans, «différente» de celle de l'Inde, souvent délégitimée ou aliénée par l'idéologie dominante de l'époque.

**Mots-clés:** Adivasi, identité, conflit, réconciliation, droits de l'homme, mémoire culturelle, obsédant