



Asian Studies Centre
St Antony's College
University of Oxford
South Asia Seminar Series, Week 5



***Rediscovering the Primitive:
Adivasi Histories in and after Subaltern Studies***



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Tuesday 10th May, 2 p.m.
Fellows' Dining Room,
St Antony's College

Two decades ago, the historical anthropologist K. Sivaramakrishnan noted with a sense of irony that “elites assuming the task of building a national culture and providing it with a liberatory/progressive history have turned to modes of knowledge and reconstruction produced in the colonial period”. This paper builds on this ironic comment to understand and critique Subaltern Studies' rediscovery of the “primitive” tribal subject in the forests of Middle India. Seeking to turn away from colonial, nationalist, and Marxist historiographic traditions, Uday Chandra argues, the Subalternists' quest for the quintessential

subaltern ended when it encountered an erstwhile favourite of colonial ethnology, namely, the tribal or aboriginal subject. Once merely an anthropological curiosity, this quintessential subaltern figure came to be reworked in the 1980s and 1990s as the anti-colonial rebel par excellence with his own impenetrable lifeworld and habits that stood in opposition to the modern state and capitalism. The old colonial tropes of irreducible cultural difference, underwritten by a paternalistic ideology of “primitivism,” now re-emerged, most notably in the writings of Ranajit Guha, as the basis of a new historiographic and theoretical turn in postcolonial India. The rediscovered primitive of the radical historian's imagination could do what the Subalternist demanded: revel, riot, and rebel. Much like Alexis de Tocqueville's reflections on the Kabyles of mid-nineteenth century Algeria or his British Indian counterparts' concerns over vanishing tribes in a predominantly caste-based society, the radical postcolonial historian thus came to rely on the dramaturgy of tragedy to re-tell adivasi pasts.

Uday Chandra is an Assistant Professor of Government at Georgetown University, Qatar. His research lies at the intersection between critical agrarian studies, political anthropology, postcolonial theory, and South Asian studies. His work has been published in the *Law & Society Review*, *Social Movement Studies*, *New Political Science*, *The Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Contemporary South Asia*, and the *Indian Economic & Social History Review*; forthcoming articles will appear in *Critical Sociology*, *Modern Asian Studies*, and *Interventions*. He has co-edited volumes and journal special issues on the ethics of self-making in modern South Asia, subaltern politics and the state in contemporary India, caste relations in colonial and postcolonial eastern India, and social movements in rural India today. He is currently working on a book, based on his doctoral research in the forest state of Jharkhand in eastern India, which revisits classic questions of power and resistance by tracing how the notion of “tribe” has curiously co-evolved with modern state-making processes in South Asia and beyond.

All are welcome

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