Class, Community and Resistance in Neo-Liberal India: The Case of ContemporaryAdivasi Politics[1]

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Theme 5: Political Parties, Alliances and Trade Union Organisations and Political Power

The articulation of political identities by historically marginalised people in the post-Nehruvian era has posed challenges for both the theory and political practice of the Indian communist movement. The social basis of these identities is formed by groups who form a large part of the rural and urban working classes that need to be mobilised to fight the current neo-liberal challenges. From the point of view of a united class struggle between the peasants and the workers, the dominant discourse has interpreted the development of such identity politics as the conspiracy of the ruling classes. In the current context it has also been argued that such politics only divides the basic classes and is used by the neo-liberal state for curbing resistance and quelling the opposition to capitalism. While this political understanding may be partially able to explain the current political realities, it is unable to fully grasp the complexity of the problem of the formation and historical development of tribal and adivasi identities. A historical view of relationship between identity and class politics shows that different stages of capitalism will yield diverse forms of hegemonic and counter hegemonic processes yielding multiple identities within the same social group. This paper focuses on the complex interrelationship between communitarian identities and class consciousness in contemporary India. Theoretically, the paper asks the question: what explains the simultaneous co-evolution and consolidation of working class formation and communitarian politics in Independent India? Further, what implications does this phenomenon have for our own understanding of working class politics.

'Adivasi' and 'Dalit' signify the formation of a political community which have as important instruments of struggle. But are these identities counter hegemonic in character or not? Under what conditions can they challenge dominant class relations? These questions have been posed many a times but not been adequately answered because the identities of the oppressed have been mistaken for their cultural politics and not for their expression of political opposition that is based on complex cross class and social group alliances. In this sense the social identities were essentially non-class in their expression, but did indeed express the interests of particular classes within communities. They were also identities of protest against state led scheduled caste and scheduled tribe identities. These identities were hegemonic in character because they largely dealt with social issues and not issues of class oppression. And the opposition to these identities was dealt with in terms of the development of adivasi and dalit politics.

The pre-neo liberal era saw the emergence of working class responses to the emerging trajectories of economic transformations. Many of these responses were structured in terms of rights based movements

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[1] This paper is extracted from Archana Prasad 'Trajectories of Adivasi Political Mobilisation' in Meena Radhakrishna eds., *First Citizens*, OUP, 2016 and Archana Prasad, 'Class , Community and Identity: The Politics of the Adivasi in Contemporary India, in Amiya Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee eds., *Marxism: Marx and Beyond*, Routledge, 2014.

whose social base lay in the working class. However the under-development of class consciousness within such radical communitarian politics limited its counter-hegemonic potential and ensured that its opposition was limited to questioning capitalist modernity rather than challenging its structure. This is largely because these non-class formations have been culturally exclusive and exclusionary to the extent that they impede the development of a comprehensive challenge through facilitation of broader unity of the oppressed people. However their potential as political allies cannot be underestimated. On the other hand more organized efforts at creating an overlap between community and class through the fostering of democratic struggles have also received some attention by communist led movements which have embedded potentially counter hegemonic identities within working class politics and mass fronts. The oral histories of such movements show how political identities of different sections such as 'dalits' and 'adivasis' were framed by both oppression and dispossession, rather than historical memories of a golden age or tradition. Within such politics, the construction of culturally exclusive communities are itself part of the hegemonic structures of oppression and therefore need to be countered with political identities that are based on the critique of tradition and are more democratized.

However the situation under neo-liberalism is different. The patterns of accumulation and accelerated pace of semi-proletarianisation has opened the possibilities of alliances between community based and class based workers organisations. This has been demonstrated in many contemporary struggles across the globe. Hence, the changing character of capital has influenced the nature of political mobilisation. In the context of this emerging trend, the paper uses the ground level experiences and oral histories of present day struggles to analyse the different strategies and dimensions used by workers to build multiple alliances. To this extent it also explores and evaluates conventional and new strategies for building opposition to neo-liberalism. In this paper I discuss identity formation amongst both Adivasis and Dalits in an attempt to seek answers to the ways in which communtarian identities and class positions may interact with each other to build resistance against neoliberalism particularly with reference to the adivasi communities in India.

The Birth of Community Based "Adivasi" Political Consciousness

The first articulation of the adivasi political community can be traced to the 1930s when adivasi elites responded to state driven tribal identities by expressing their ambitions for autonomy and independent political rights. This put pressure on mainstream nationalist leaders to negotiate with them at the threshold of independence. This negotiation was done in the context of two major developments during colonial capitalism. The first was the proposal for the existence of partially excluded and excluded areas which had been mooted by the British in the Government of India Act, 1935. The practice of scheduling tribal areas had already started under the Scheduled Areas Act, 1874 and this itself had created a space for the formation and articulation of tribal identity.[2] The second were the processes of primary accumulation which   led to the alienation of resource dependent people from their own conditions of production and brought about a considerable displacement of livelihoods. This trend not only led to the migration of several adivasi families but also resulted in their entry into the labour market. Thus labour became the main mechanism by which these social groups continued to be integrated into the larger colonial capitalist system.[3] In such a scenario the official discourse of 'tribal welfare' served as a

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[2] Savyasaachi, *Tribal Forest Dwellers and Self Rule,* Introduction.
[3] Archana Prasad, Capitalism, Forestry and Tribal Labour in Central India' *Social Action*, New Delhi, Volume 60, No 2, April-June, 2010.

hegemonic tool for centralised decision making in natural resource management regimes that both structured and camaflouged this process.

The rise of adivasi autonomy movements by the late colonial period have to be seen in a context where a dispossessed leadership used communitarian politics to counter and demystify the state politics of tribal welfare. The most well known struggles for political autonomy and rights were the Naga and Manipur demands for separation from India at the threshold of independence.[4] There were also demands for regional autonomy the earliest of which was the demand for a separate state of Jharkhand by the Adibasi Mahsabha led by Jaipal Singh. Such articulations took the form of a generic 'adivasi' identity which was identified with all forest dwelling people especially in Central and Eastern India. Here specific communities presented themselves as the first inhabitants of their regions with natural rights over their historical homelands. This perhaps was the genesis of 'adivasi' politics in the country and especially in the wake of the Jharkhand Movement of the 1930s when the Adibasi Mahasabha under the leadership of Jaipal Singh. Recounting the beginning of Adibasi politics, Jaipal Singh said in 1948 that till now their "initiative has been of making the primitive man conscious of his political rights. Adibasis have begun to realise that their salvation is in their own hands."[5] This understanding laid the basis for the subsequent Jharkhand party and its demand for separate statehood that was achieved at the turn of the twentieth century. Writing about it some activists opined that the creation of the state was a success of Jharkhand nationalism which was 'adivasi' at its core. Here the term 'adivasi' implied the communities of those people who were not integrated into the caste Hindu society of sedentary peasant cultivation.[6] For example it was argued that elites within adivasi societies who had got incorporated into the caste peasant society and had compromised with the ruling elites to maintain their zamindaris and chieftaincies. Such an understanding implied an overlap between class positions and ethnic political identities which came to inform all forms of adivasi politics.[7]

By the advent of independence, the institutionalisation of the state induced tribal identity was taking place through the debates on the fifth and sixth schedules whose discourse was framed by the Government of India Act 1935. The Act allowed for the formation of district and regional councils in order to incorporate the political ambitions of the emerging adivasi elites.[8] Such measures were however opposed by many nationalist leaders who saw the demands for such institutions as a part of an isolationist tendencies that would create enclaves of traditional life that were aberrations in a modern nation. They accused the drafting committee of imitating imperialist strategies and encouraging separatist tendencies. The nature of opposition was both casteist and communal in nature. While the north eastern nationalists accussed the Christian missions of instigating separatist tendencies within the adivasis by helping in the consolidation of their political identity. At another level the Hindu Mahasabha and its ideologues questioned the use of the word adibasi or adivasi and argued for the use of the term Banajati. The main objection of leaders like K.M. Munshi lay in the fact that the 'Adibasi' did not exist

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[4] For illustrations of this see the regional examples in K.S. Singh eds., *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol. 1 and 2, Manohar, New Delhi, 2006.

[5] Jaipal Singh, 'Jai Jharkhand, Jai Adibasi, Jai Hind' address to the All India Adibasi Mahasabha, 28 February 1948 reproduced in R.D. Munda and S. Bosu Mullick eds., *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples Struggle for Autonomy*, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 200, pp. 2-14, quotation p. 11.

[6] Dev Nathan, 'Jharkhand: Factors and Future' in .D. Munda and S. Bosu Mullick eds., *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples Struggle for Autonomy*, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 2000, pp. 119-130.

[7] See for instance, Surajit Sinha, 'State Formation and Rajput Myth in India' in Herman Kulke eds., *The State in India*, Oxford University Press, 1995 (reprint from 1962).

[8] For this point see Savyasaachi, *Tribal Forest Dwellers and Self Rule in India*.

as a single community and the differentiation between communities had to be taken into account.[9] But this understanding was not merely an analytical and empirical understanding of the formation of the adibasi identity, but a political understanding which was meant to prevent the political consolidation of the politics of the 'adivasi'. It would also provide the basis for the expansion of the social basis of hindu nationalist politics, a phenomenon that was evident in the post 1980s with the expanding work of the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh.

This powerful perspective was countered by advocates of adivasi rights and a newly emerging political elite. Jaipal Singh, the founder of the Adibasi Mahasabha saw the proposals of the for the fifth and sixth schedule as a part of a larger process of the negotiation with the tribal people and their relationship with the larger Indian nation. From the north east it was left to the premier of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi and Rev Nicholas Roy (a tribal member from hilly areas of Assam) to provide a more substantive argument against the assimilation of tribal people. Replying to insinuations that the government had failed to understand the need for assimilation of tribal people, Bordoloi made his most passionate plea against assimilation when he stated that "there are certain institutions amongst these hill tribes which, in my opinion are so good that if we wanted to destroy them I considered it to be very wrong". At the same time Nicholas Roy went a step further and questioned why these communities should assimilate themselves in a higher culture when they had a better culture than them.[10] The emerging political elites thus articulated the Adibasi identity and its cultural differences in opposition to two different hegemonies. The first was the concept of the state sponsored notion of the 'tribal' and the hindu nationalist notion of the 'banjati' or what was later called banvasi.

The conditions for the birth adivasi political consciousness took place in response to several competitive hegemonic influences at the time of independence. Adivasi demands were structured by the need to counter the tools of ideological domination that were structured to strengthen the systems of primary accumulation in resource rich regions. But the ideologies of domination did not emanate from the state alone, but also from socially and economically powerful classes whose interests were closely bound with trading and industrial capital. In this context the politics of the 'adivasi' did not represent any specific ethnic or social group. Rather it represented a new political community and where socio-cultural symbolism became the norm of expression. Such a cultural expression was structured by both the processes of accumulation by the state as well as the institutionalisation of the state structured tribal identity in independent India. Independent India's new tribal policy recognised the cultural specific character of these social groups without giving adequate recognition to their ecologically and economically specificity. This led to the over developed identity which did not necessarily represent a direct relationship with its material basis. Though the Nehruvian state propagated the adopted programmes of tribal welfare it also intensified the processes of dispossession which led to the formation of a labouring class. This was reflected in the Nehruvian policies of multi-purpose block development programmes that invested heavily in social programmes but very little in productive resources.[11] It was the impact of these programmes and that influenced the development of an informed political leadership which saw itself with some access to political power but no access to its own natural resources. Hence the discourse of the adivasi was structured by the changing character of the independent Indian state which unleashed theand the development of an adivasi consciousness was

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[9] For a fuller discussion of this see the exchange between K.M. Munshi and Jaipal Singh on the Constitutent Assembly on 5 september 1949.

[10] Constituent assembly debates quotation 6 Sept 1949.

[11] Archana Prasad, 'On the Margins of Indian Planning' in V. Upadhyay, Shakti Kak et al ed., *From Statism to Neoliberalism: The Development Process in India*, Daanish Books, New Delhi, 2010.

intimately linked with the character of state policies. This formative asymmetry was the defining fulcrum of class and community based politics in tribal regions.

Class Based Politics and the Adivasi Consciousness

Independent India also saw another form of adivasi politics whose social basis lay in the class based political organisation by the communists. Such a political mobilisation was largely a result of the revolts which occurred in the post second world war period and were carried on well into the 1950s and 1960s.[12] The most famous of these revolts were the Telengana (Andhra Pradesh), Tebhaga (West Bengal) and the Warli (Thane, Maharashtra) struggles . However one of the oldest communist led tribal organisations was the Ganamukti Parishad in the North Eastern State of Tripura. Though the struggles were largely a result of the organisation of landless agricultural workers, many of them led to the specific organisation of 'tribal people' and also created alternative open ended identities. This was especially the case with Godavari Parulekar's Warli struggle in Thane (Maharashtra) and the continuous organisation of tribal people but the lesser known movements of Tripura's Ganamukti Parishad and Kerala's Punnapra Vayalar revolt.[13] Of these the development of the Warli and the Tripura organisations in the post independence period are especially interesting as they help to analyse the relationship between class and community structures. This relationship was mediated by the understanding that the organisation of adivasi people would help in building a common understanding and strengthening the alliance between peasants and workers.

The communist work in these regions has already led to the formation of multiple political identities which were shaped by their own local context. However there were some similarities in the way in the methods of organisation and mobilisation that led to the articulation of an adivasi consciousness which was embedded in a perspective of working class unity. This simultaneous articulation and existence of a non-class adivasi and working class consciousness was an organised attempt and not the natural outcome of larger changes in the adivasi social structure. For example Godavari Parulekar's narrative *Adivasi Revolt: The Story of the Struggle of the Warlis* traced the existence of an adivasi consciousness to the process of accumulation that was borne out of the penetration of colonial and national capital in the Dahanu taluka of Thane (Maharashtra). Hence the whole idea of the 'adivasi' was the result of a certain dispossession and was constituted in opposition to the concentration of capital and accumulation of surplus by the ruling classes represented by large land owners and traders.[14] The processes of dispossession were however multi-layered and articulated themselves at several levels. In the first instance there were struggles against the low wages and unpaid labour of the contractors working for large companies. Another level of articulation was achieved through land struggles which acknowledged the historical land dispossession of the adivasis. These land struggles were essentially based on a redistributive agenda that organised adivasis to take over the surplus land of large land holders. By doing so they strengthened the collective power of the small peasants and also protected their land holdings against the large landlords.[15] This meant that the articulation of the 'adivasi' consciousness in Thane and the 'upjati' consciousness in Tripura was not inimical to the idea of a larger class unity

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[12] For details on the class based struggles of the early independence period see A.R. Desai eds., *Peasant Struggles in India After Independence*, Oxford University Press, 1979.

[13] See for instance Dasaratha Debbarma., *Gana Mukti Parishad in Building the Peasant Movement in Tripura*, All India Kisan Sabha, Golden Jubilee Series Number 7, 1986 and E.M.S. Namboodripad, *On the Agrarian Question in India*, Peoples Publishing House, 1952..

[14] Godavari Parulekar, *Adivasis Revolt: The Story of the Struggle of the Warlis*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1975, p.1-3.

[15] M.A. Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1974.

amongst all dispossessed people. It also aided the process of class formation of 'adivasis' as both peasants and agricultural workers through a concerted sectional organisation. In this sense the adivasi consciousness articulated within and embedded in the communist movement was democratically constituted and transformative in character. It sought to organise adivasis as dispossessed peasants who would contribute to the larger fight for land reforms even while they also reproduced a historically constituted adivasi consciousness. This class based adivasi consciousness had multiple layers as it organised the adivasis for land on the one hand and for getting the benefits of state led affirmative action on the other hand. This complex phenomenon was however never theorised within communist movement as its primary aim remained the restoration of land rights and the organisation of adivasi for higher wages.

It is interesting to note that different strands of the communist movements attempted to resolve the problem of the overlap between class positions and the articulation of non-class based adivasi consciousness. In Thane district the adivasis were organised primarily as dispossessed peasants even though their specific needs were sought to be addressed through the formation of a social service organisation 'adivasi mandal' which began to address the problems of tribal education. Even though the adivasis occupied land through their land struggles, the lack of a 'legal title' and recognition of their rights by the state structured the articulation of the a specific adivasi identity. Further the processes of affirmative action put into place by the independent Indian state also ensured that the communist parties organised different sectional interests for their legitimate rights. Thus the communist mass organisations organised scheduled caste and tribe students within the framework of the larger students' movement in states like Andhra Pradesh. In Dahanu Taluka of Thane they continued to struggle for legalisation of land rights in fifth schedule areas and also organise adivasis for their own forest rights. That this consciousness was predicated on a perspective that the 'adivasis' themselves needed to be modernised in a class consciousness was evident from the fact that communists set up schools and colleges to organise neighbourhood tribal people. They were however forced to recognise some community characteristics of adivasi life which were being strengthened by competing organisations like the Kashtkari Sangathana. As a scholar writing the history of peasant organisations in Thane explains, the problem of bridging the gap between the peasant consciousness and adivasi consciousness remains despite successful economic struggles that have given dignity to the Warlis.[16]

In the north eastern state of Tripura the relationship between the communist movement and the adivasi consciousness has evolved around a different trajectory. The Gana Mukti Parishad which began as the Jan Shiksha movement in the hilly regions of Tripura and was formed much before the communist political organisation. The samiti was largely an organisation of adivasi youth leadership which laid the foundations of the Gana Mukti Parishad. The Parishad itself was militant organisation that started as a campaign of civil rights, political participation and economic development of the tribal people living in the highlands in the early decades of independence. The decades of armed struggle that followed police repression of peaceful resistance was seen by the Bengali elites as an anti-Bengali movement. But studies of the period show that there was hardly any Bengali migration from highlands thus revealing that this analysis has little basis. This was also because the Gana Mukti Parishad leadership did not itself believe in an exclusivist adivasi consciousness and tried to create a unity between the Benagalis and adivasis. In contrast with this the TUJS and Tripura National Volunteers adopted an exclusivist stance and took to armed struggle especially after the formation of the first left front government in

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[16] Sulabha Brahme et al., Sulabha Brahme et al., *Agrarian Structure, Movements and Peasant Organisations: Maharashtra*, Manak, Delhi, 2004, Chapter on Struggles in Thane.

1978. The pro-tribal measures that followed and the consistent advocacy and struggle for the autonomous district councils revealed the communist led GMP's understanding of tribal exclusivism. It considered the sixth schedule as a way of transforming and democratising the tribal societies themselves in order to develop leadership amongst working class adivasis. It also saw it as a measure to correct the political imbalances between the adivasis and others especially the Bengalis. In this sense the TTAADC was used as a mechanism to build a democratic adivasi consciousness. To this end education was put under the control of the TTAADC and Kokborok (the local dialect) was given due recognition. [17] This was another way of accessing tribal people and transforming their consciousness. Thus though the effort of the GMP was specific in its context it tried to mobilise adivasis in to a way of modern politics and build their linkages with the larger movement. In the process it attempted to organise working class adivasis to intervene in their own situation and democratise their own societies.

There was also a third trajectory of the communist mobilisation of adivasis in the form of the naxalbari movement. Ideologues of the movement worked largely amongst the Santhal peasantry of West Bengal. It is well known that the effective implementation of land reforms was one of the main demands of the communist movement. Therefore with the formation of the United Front government in West Bengal (with the communists as partners) in 1967 the CPI (M) minister of land revenue, Hare Krishna Konar, announced the redistribution of surplus lands amongst the peasants. However the process of the implementation of land reforms was a difficult one and the landlords took the help of the bureaucracy in order to resist the seizure of land. In addition there was no legal provision for the confiscation *benami* lands which were occupied by the landlords. This accentuated the conflict between the landlords and the peasantry, and led to the organization of the Naxalbari uprising amongst the tribal peasantry of Jalpaiguri under the radical leadership of the faction of the All India Kisan Sabha.[18]

While building a non-exclusivist adivasi consciousness was the hallmark of a class based perspective, it must be borne in mind that the different strategies of communist led adivasi mobilisation were primarily a result of the way in which the different trends of the larger movement resolved the problems of relating the class position of the adivasis with the reproduction of a sectional political consciousness. The undivided communist party (and later CPI and CPI (M)) recognised the strategic value of fostering a democratic adivasi consciousness which needed to be reproduced in order avail the benefits of affirmative action. Yet this consciousness would have little meaning if it was not grounded in the larger agrarian movement which would socialise the adivasis into class based politics.[19] The naxal movement altogether ignored the existence of a community consciousness and saw the formation of a class consciousness as obliterating all forms of pre-modern community based politics. In both cases the underlying assumption appeared to treat the adivasi as a dispossessed peasant who needed to be organised around land rights. In this sense, the persistence of the adivasi consciousness may have existed in political practice, but was not reflected in the theoretical paradigm of communist thinking. Clearly one strand of the communist movement considered the reproduction of a democratic adivasi consciousness as a political necessity. Yet this recognition did not reinterpret the way in which the sectional adivasi consciousness would continue to co-exist and overlap with class based politics within the framework of state capitalism. This ideological shortcoming ensured the seminal struggles of early

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[17] Harihar Bhattacharya, *Communism in Tripura*, Ajanta, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 162-196

[18] Kanu Sanyal, *Report on the Peasant Movement in the Terai Region* reprinted in Samar Sen, Debabrata Panda and Ashish Lahiri (eds.,) *Naxalbari and After: A Frontier Anthology* (Calcutta: Kathashilpa: 1978) Volume 2, pp.203-231.

[19] Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution* and Prakash Singh, *The Naxalite Movement in India*, (New Delhi: Rupa and Co: 1995).

independence period did not lead to a more generalised understanding of the adivasi question within Marxist thinking.

Complementary Hegemonies: Hindutva and the Neoliberal Order

With all its limitations, the politics of the adivasi had been counter hegemonic to a limited degree and served as an important focal point of opposition to state capitalism in the last four decades. But the language and non-class community character of this protest has faced severe challenges in the face of two dominant tendencies: the establishment of the neoliberal paradigm and the expansion of Hindutva politics in the tribal region. These two tendencies are interrelated with each other and reflect the crisis in the social welfare system that was crucial to the growth of an adivasi political leadership. As mentioned earlier, in contrast with an 'indigenous' adivasi identity, the Sangh Parivar stressed the identity of the 'banvasi' or primitive forest dwelling people whose modernisation process would only be completed if they got assimilated into the Hindu society. This process of assimilation intensified during the period of the NDA regime which saw [20]

The second factor aiding the expansion of rightwing hindu forces led by the arms of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh in the tribal areas was their linkages with mainstream nationalism. Ideologically both social and political forces worked on the assumption that the reform of the 'hindu' society would help in an effective integration into the mainstream society. But there was one difference between the two forces, most Gandhian social reform movements did not only speak of the need to uplift the tribal people but also to reform hindu society itself so that they could be assimilated within it as equals. This alliance of mainstream nationalism with right wing nationalists in order to edge out the Christian missionaries played an important role in the expansion of such organisations.[21] Hence the 1970s saw the setting up of several mass social reform fronts like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams and their rapid expansion after emergency and the revival of the Jan Sangh. By the turn of the century there were Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams in 8955 places in 312 districts of the country under the supervision of 1203 full-time workers and the movement received a definite fillip after the BJP came into power. The tribal affairs ministry and Khadi and Village Industries Commission were used by the government to dole out grants to those NGOs and voluntary sector organisations that are steadily implementing the BJP agenda in these regions. More than 85 per cent of the funds of the Schedule Castes and Tribes Commission were given to NGOs associated with the Sangh Parivar in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand.[22]

However it is important to unveil the relationship between the expansion of Hindutva forces and the social classes that have formed the foundations of the opening up of the forest economies on which the 'adivasis' had become dependent. Aggressive Hindutva (in the form of reconversion campaigns) in the post mandal period and the initiation of policies aiding corporate capital exemplified the BJP rule at the Centre. Its policies revealed that most of this opening up had taken place for the benefit of the traders, big companies and foreign money who funded the activities of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Saraswati Shiksha Sansthan (an umbrella organisation of all Parivar educational institutions). It is no coincidence then that the Shishu Mandir Trust is headed by one of the largest Marwari traders of Kolkata and its local branches are patronised by influential landholders and traders. Thus the activities of the Sangh Parivar have ended up strengthening, rather than dismantling the very forces that have been

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[20] See for instance Nandini Sundar, 'Indiginise, Nationalise and Spiritualise: An Agenda for Education? *International Social Science Journal*, 2002.

[21] For this point see Archana Prasad "Paving the Path for Hindutva" *Against Ecological Romanticism*, Chapter 3.

[22] Archana Prasad, Can the BJP Make Tribal India Shine? *Peoples Democracy* 4 April 2004.

exploiting the tribal people since the advent of the British rulers in these areas.[23] The policies of the NDA government (1998-2004) only strengthened and aided this process. Disinvestment of industries like BALCO and the privatisation of land, water and forest resources as in the case of the Sheonath river, will only lead to the further deprivation, and unemployment of tribal people. The withdrawal of the state from key sectors has led to the reduction of state investment in infrastructure development. In this context, all attempts at the decentralised management of forests and forest produce collection have only strengthened the traders, industrialists and multinational companies who are appropriating the knowledge, labour and resources of tribal people for their own profits.

The second major characteristic of the neo-liberal paradigm has been the withdrawal of the state from welfare services that have been crucial to the survival of 'tribal people'. The constricting of job and employment opportunities have created new types of conflicts that were evident in the Kandhmal riots of 2008 which took a communal turn through the formation of a 'hinduised tribal identity' under the influence of hindutva forces. The conflict between Christian dalits and the Kui and Kandh hinduised tribals began with the Christian Pano demanding ST status. But Kui Samaj opposed this and received full support from the assinated Sangh leader Lakshmananda Saraswati. Inspired by this support the Samaj called for a bandh on Christmas day resulting in the riots of December 2007. The demand of the Pano assumes importance because Orissa VHP secretary, Gauri Prasad Rath stated that the parivar organisations would ensure that those who converted to Christianity would not get the benefits of any reservation and would lose both their SC and ST status. This demonstrated how right wing forces could hamper the unity of the welfare dependent tribal societies in their opposition to dominant and exploitative influences.[24]

The third feature which is characteristic of this period is the changing relationship between adivasi politics and the state. Since corporate penetration in tribal areas is led and facilitated by the state its power to negotiate with the adivasi political elite has reduced. Consequently, the repression of opposition to corporate capitalism has also increased manifold. However in contrast with tendency, there is also another apparently contradictory trend. The discourse of recognising the legitimate rights of the adivasi people has been incorporated within the neo-liberal state to some extent as illustrated by the enactment of the of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The Act not only revised the deadline for the settlement of rights from 1980 to December 2005, but also enumerated thirteen types of rights over land and produce. It widened the scope of the rights to include people who were displaced and people living in national parks and sanctuaries. But above all, it attempted to democratise the rights settlement process by making the panchayats responsible for the initiation of the process. It also made stringent conditions for the diversion of forest lands that were settled under the Act. Some of these radical and important provisions were not the initiative of the state, but the result of the recommendations of the joint parliamentary committee. This committee opened up the process of legislation to public debate and negotiated changes by providing a platform to tribal rights organisations, democratic movements and some political formations like the left. But on closer examination it is evident that the neo-liberal state has been able to make some fundamental changes in the Act by inserting some limiting provisions in the fine print. It has thus been able to use its state power to protect the interests of the forest bureaucracy, the conventional

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[23] For politics of reconversion see Dharmendra Kumar and Yemuna Sunny eds., *Proselytisation in India: The Process of Hinduisation in Tribal Societies*, New Delhi, 2009.

[24] For this see Angana Chatterji, *Violent Gods: Hindu Nationalism from India's Present: Narratives from Orissa*, Three Essays Collective, New Delhi 2009. Also see Archana Prasad, Kandmal: The March of Hindutva in Tribal Orissa *Peoples Democracy* 20 October 2008.

environmentalists and industry.[25] The impact of these three factors has been further exemplified by a looming agrarian crisis that has dried up all employment opportunities for agricultural labour. The implications and challenges posed by these wide ranging structural changes are serious for adivasi politics. In the wake of increasing landlessness and displacement the 'adivasi' worker has increasingly entered the mass of casual labour force which is largely migratory and mobile in nature. At the same time the disinvestment in state led tribal welfare programmes and the intensification of the penetration of corporate capital has increased the likelihood of the overlap between adivasi and working class consciousness. Such and emerging trend is decidedly incompatible with the aggressive adivasi politics which is based more on a sharp critique of 'modern' development and not of the capitalist form of modern development.[26]

Adivasi Worker and Working Class Consciousness

The last three decades have resulted in the emergence a majority of the adivasis as of the rural and urban workers. Simultaneously multiple identities and expressions of adivasi consciousness have also emerged as a result of the diverse forms that this process has taken. Today, this dual phenomena has contextualised the growth and expansion of corporate capitalism in the tribal regions. By the same measure, the current stage of neo-liberal corporate capitalism has influenced and structured the changes within adivasi working class.   The increasing control of natural resources by corporate capital and the agrarian distress has dislocated and disposed a large number of these social groups changed the balance between the town and the countryside. In other words it has created a 'metabolic rift' that has led to increasing urbanisation and the changing character of the rural political economy.[27] Such a rift has manifested itself macro-trends whose impact on the adivasis has implications for political obligation and mobilisation. The first manifestation is the growing land grab by corporate houses for whom land acquistion laws are being modified. The second aspect of the reforms concerns diversion of common lands and forests (previously controlled by the state) to corporate houses through liberal environmental regulations. The resultant change in land use patterns in the is evident from the fact that almost 5.88 lakh hectares of forest lands have been diverted for non-forestry purposes since the beginnings of the economic reforms. The rate of diversion has only increased from 56419 hectares per year between 2000-

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[25] One of the major changes was with respect to recognising the rights of the non-scheduled tribes. While accepting the condition of residence in forests for three generations, the present bill defines one generation as equal to 25 years. This means that non-scheduled tribes will have to prove that they have lived in the forests for at least 75 years or since 1930 if they are to benefit from this legislation. The second change made by the government is with regard to the definition and powers of the Gram Sabha. Now the Gram Sabha has been altered from a "hamlet based panchayat" to a revenue panchayat which in many areas is dominated by upper castes in the non-scheduled areas. The government has also ensured that the Gram Sabha is no longer the final authority to settle rights (as recommended by the JPC) by giving the sub divisional committee this power. The third change that the government has made is in the nature of rights granted under the bill. Fuel wood, bamboo, stones etc have been kept out of the definition of minor forest produce and current bill is silent on the right of multiple land use of the people doing shifting cultivation. Further the right to transportation of produce from national parks and sanctuaries has also been tampered with. Finally, the clauses making the Gram Sabha's consent mandatory in case of diversion of forest lands for and ensuring a minimum support price for minor forest produce have been deleted as they hindered the penetration of market forces into tribal areas. For detailed discussions of this see Special issue on Forest and Tribals in *Seminar* August 2005. Also see Archana Prasad, Survival at Stake *Frontline* 30 December 2006 and Archana Prasad, Conservation and Development in the Tribal Bill *Social Scientist* July-August 2006.

[26] Archana Prasad, Neoliberalism, Tribal Survival and Agrarian Distress, p.112.

[27] A discussion of this historical process and the concepts of metabolic are well discusses in Jason.W. More, 'Capitalism as World Ecology: Braudel and Marx is Environmental History' *Environment and Organization*, 2003.

2004 to 71813 lakh hectares per annum between 2005-2008, ie., the second decade of the reforms.[28] These two trends have resulted in the increasing landlessness of tribal people where the numbers of landless scheduled tribes have increased by almost 6 percent between 1993-94 and 2004-05. But the interesting aspect of this is that there has been a decline in the percentage of land holders owning less than one hectare of land.[29] This indicates an increase in benami holdings, where even corporate houses have begun to buy lands in tribal areas in the name of tribal peasants.[30]

This increasing contradiction between industry and labour has resulted in the fundamental changes within the working class of which the adivasi is an integral part. In the last two decades adivasis are becoming more and more dependent on urban and non-agricultural labour for their livelihoods. Hence about 80 percent of the tribal people depend on either daily wage labour (in rural or urban areas) for their survival and only about half of them get one weeks work in the month.[31] It is significant that the number of scheduled tribe household migrants living in the urban areas increased from 2.9 percent to 6.2 percent in the fifteen years between 1993 and 2008. At the same time the rural migration amongst the scheduled tribes decreased from 2.7 percent to 1.9 percent.[32] This also lends credence to the conclusions of the provisional census of 2011 which points towards the greater concentration of population in the urban areas.[33] Thus within this general proletarianisation of the peasantry, adivasi and dalit labourers have a special place as they form a bulk of the mobile and circulatory migratory labour.[34] Migrant adivasi workers have a strong social basis in the rural as well as urban working class and therefore possess the potential of facilitating an alliance with both the peasantry as well as between the rural and urbal worker.

The consolidation of such a class formation within these historically vulnerable social groups has exposed the limits communitarian mobilisation of the adivasis The formation of the tribal states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh and the exponential growth of Maoists in these regions has shown that community based politics itself has to transform itself in order to defend adivasi rights in the wake of this new stage of corporate capitalism. Hence we see that in cases like POSCO and Vedanta displaced adivasis expressed the struggle for rights in ethnically and culturally constituted terms, but the social foundation of the protest lay in the most deprived sections.[35] But this overlap between adivasi

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[28] Archana Prasad, „Neoliberalism, Tribal Survival and Agrarian Distress‟ in Alternate Survey Group (eds), Two Decades of Neoliberalism: Alternative Economic Survey, Daanish Books, New Delhi, 2010, ., p. 118

[29] Archana Prasad, Neoliberalism, Tribal Survival and Agrarian Distress, pp. 121-123.

[30] Archana Prasad, 'Illegal Projects, Land Grab and Corporate Capitalism in Tribal Regions' *Peoples Democracy* 24 June 2012. Thus power companies in Chhattisgarh were using *benami* deals to hasten project implementation circumvent formal procedures. Hence the Avantha group of companies had started their power project even before they had approached the government to acquire 358 hectares of land (of which about 50 hectares is tribal land) for the project. This is only one power project in Chhattisgarh. There are 70 other coal thermal power projects coming up in mineral rich areas and most industrial houses seeking to benefit from these projects have purchased lands in the name of some tribal servants or guards employed by them or even unknown tribal people. Similar illegal mining operations are rampant in Andhra Pradesh in the Araku valley. In many cases the Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation acted as a front for private companies and taking over lands of small farmers.

[31] National Sample Survey Organisation 64th Round, *Employment and Unemployment in India by Social Group 2007-2008*, Delhi, 2010, p.63.

[32] National Sample Survey Organisation 64th Round, *Migration in India 2007-2008*, Delhi, 2010, p.17.,

[33] Census of India 2011, *Provisional Census Totals, Paper 2 Volume 2*, Registrar of Census, New Delhi, 2012. .

[34] Indu Agnihotri and Indrani Mazumdar, *Gender and Migration: Negotiating Rights - A Women's Movement Perspective (Key Findings)*, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, 2011, p.53.

[35] For instance see Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of this Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel*, Orient Blackswan, Delhi, 2010. Thus the sacredness and cultural importance of Niyamgiri mountain became symbolic of the

consciousness and class position has been engineered through a restructuring of the capitalist enterprise rather than an organised political effort or an alternative vision for resolving the problems of these oppressed social groups. Hence it strengthens and reproduces community based consciousness instead of transforming it into a working class consciousness.

The Rise of Maoism in Neo-Liberal Times

The last two decades of neo-liberalism have seen the accelaration of corporate penetration into resource rich regions. This paradigm is based on the understanding that the market would be the best equaliser and the mushrooming of open market trade in forest produce with big industry resulted in both land alienation and livelihood dispossession, which in turn resulted in the emergence of a tribal and dalit rural working class. This working class was largely employed as agricultural and casual labour in both government and private enterprises and farms. Such corporate capitalism has been marked by three significant features that characterise the neo-liberal reforms in tribal areas. The first is the rapid pace of corporate penetration through land acquisition in tribal regions. Of particular importance is the the qualitative change in the process of diversion of forest lands for big projects. Much of this diversion is a result of the increase in mining leases and infrastructural projects. While in the first decade of the reforms the rate of the diversion of forests was approximately 21000 hectares per year but this figure went upto about 70000 hectares in the second decade and especially from 2004 onwards. This diversion is largely for mining companies who are now forcing the corporate takeover of mining resources and creating serious social conflicts within the regions.[36] Both roads electricity and other types of projects were essential to opening up the markets of natural resources and this was seen in the way in areas like Bastar which had one of the biggest markets of minor forest products. At the same time the much acclaimed success of the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana in Jharkhand also opened up mineral resources to corporate capital generating new types of conflicts. Thus while the development of infrastructure gave comparative advantage to states to attract corporate investment, the tribal people continue to be bereft of basic facilities. 84 per cent of them have no drinking water and 93 per cent are lacking any decent housing or toilet facility. This shows that the entire diversion process is not aimed at the overall development of the tribal villages, but only at the opening up of natural resources to the unregulated market. All this has ensured that the primary conflict of interests is now between the adivasis and big capital. Similarly where the interests of forest dwelling people have come in direct conflict with private corporate capital, the state has taken the side of corporate capital often leading to largescale police atrocities and violent suppression of adivasi protests.

The contemporary politics of the adivasi is defined by this context and has taken certain specific forms. The first thing to be noticed is the incorporation of adivasi elites in within the framework of the neo-liberal state. Thus it is not surprising that some of the most aggressive policies for corporate penetration in resource rich areas have been followed in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha. The impact of such penetration has led to the semi-proletarianisation of the adivasis and widened the class divide within adivasis. The rising influence of the maoists in central India reflects the inability of adivasi elite politics to .cope with the impact and effectively check the advance of corporate capitalism. While it is true that many local struggles have erupted against specific instances of corporate penetration, especially in the case of mining leases (for exampleVedanta and Posco in Orissa), these localized struggles have been

Vedanta struggle where united democratic forces are carrying out a sustained struggle despite the repression of the state. In this situation the politics of the adivasi as epitomised in the symbolic use of the Niyamgiri mountain expressed the interests of all oppressed people at that particular historical conjecture.

[36] Archana Prasad, 'Neoliberalism, Tribal Survival and Agrarian Distress', p.118.

overshadowed by the violent conflict between the 'Maoists' and the Indian state. Though the impact and character of 'maoism'is debatable in scholarly writings, . there is no doubt that the uneven development of the tribal areas has led to the political domination by armed maoist guerillas in the forested tracts of central and eastern India. Because of this scholars and activists find legitimacy for Maoists' activities in these root causes and assume mass support by the adivasis for 'Maoist' operations. Hence, the 'Maoists' represent the 'people' and have no option but to retaliate against the initiation of counter insurgency tactics like Salwa Judum or the para-military force led Operation Green hunt. However, this picture is a simplistic one as it does not explain the differences between the emergence and strengthening of 'Maoism' in areas where land reforms have occurred and in places where they have not occurred so far. Thus, the 'Maoist' activity in West Bengal is propelled by factors that are different from those in the States of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. In this context, it is important to note that in West Bengal about 20 percent of the 29.88 million beneficiaries of land reforms belonged to the Scheduled Tribes. In the three districts of the Jangal Mahal areas where the 'Maoists' are now active, there were about 2.5 million tribal people who became title holders of surplus land and about 40 thousand got share cropping rights.[37] But these factors did not mean that no work was to be done in tribal areas. This was in sharp contrast to areas like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand which have a history of the tribal people losing their lands to non-tribal farmers, moneylenders and traders.[38]

This situation has arisen because of the way in which neo-liberal ideology was able to co-opt the vocabulary of community ownership and control into its own framework. It thus exposed the inadequacy of primordial identity politics to provide an alternative discourse of resistance. However, the recent analysis of 'Maoist' ideology and practice in these areas has also shown that they do not pose any real threat and challenge to the neo-liberal resource management regime.[39] Though the 'Maoists' may have used the strategy of building mass organizations around issues of daily importance, their practices change radically once they established their control. This is clearly evident in Dantewada where the establishment of the 'Maoist liberated zone' was established to provide a safe military base to leaders and cadres who were facing action from the state police in Andhra Pradesh. Many of these cadres had also been politically dislocated from the tribal villages which they had once dominated in the agency areas because their social base had shifted to other mainstream left political parties who had begun to challenge their politics. Hence, it is not surprising that the first forays of the 'Maoists' were in the Andhra-Chhattisgarh border and their guerrilla base has also been set up there. At the same time, the absence of the state and its limited impact from the pre-reform days onwards have also influenced this growth. The increase in the rate and intensity of the penetration of global industrial capital has added and matured this process. In the process, the 'Maoists' have ended up using and manipulating both local villagers and the market forces to strengthen their infrastructure and forces through the extraction of surplus.[40] An analysis of the working of the guerrilla base shows that the 'Maoists' tend to be a mirror image of an exploitative state where tactics of repression and taxation are concerned. In fact, their processes of attracting surplus labour and taxes does not spare even those people who are ordinarily outside the net of taxation in a mainstream policy regime. Hence, even though 'Maoists' may appear to be expressing the aspirations of an ordinary tribal, in reality they cannot provide a credible opposition to neo-liberal market forces on which they partly depend for their survival. Rather, the character of their

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[37] Government of West Bengal, *Economic Review 2009*-2010, Calculated from appendix tables.
[38] For a critique of the 'Maoist' strategy see Pushpinder Grewal, 'Indian Maoism: Flawed Strategy and Perverted Praxis' in Prasenjit Bose ed., *Maoism: A Critique from the Left*, Leftword Books, New Delhi, 2010.
[39] For detailed analysis of the political and ideological practice of CPI (Maoists) in Chhattisgarh, see Archana Prasad, 'The Political Economy of Maoist Violence in Chhattisgarh, *Social Scientist* , March-April 2010. pp. 3–24.
[40] *Ibid.*: 16–21.

control and politics has discredited other social and political movements in the region and made them, and the 'adivasi' society, more vulnerable to the violence of the current neo-liberal state.

The 'Maoists' seek to accentuate the contradiction between the adivasis and the neo-liberal resource management regime. Though the 'Maoists' may have used the strategy of building mass organisations around issues of daily importance, their practices change radically once they established their control. Their techniques of governance within the 'liberated areas' included the extraction of surplus from both adivasis and their exploiters who operated within the market system. Hence the areas controlled by the 'Maoists' have tend to be a mirror image of an exploitative state where tactics of repression and taxation are concerned.[41] In this sense, the aim of the 'Maoist' organisations has not been to develop either class consciousness or carry out class based mobilisation that seeks to challenge corporate capital in its present form. [42] Therefore the potential of the development of a working class based adivasi consciousness remains untapped in these objective circumstances which have weakened the potential of community based politics in this region.

Class, Community and Adivasi Politics

Thus, the ideological and tactical failures of primordial and 'Maoist' politics in dealing with the neo-liberalism have placed before us a new challenge where the difference between class based politics and communitarian adivasi politics are becoming easier to resolve. This has been seen in the case of the confrontation between corporate houses, the Indian state and grass root adivasi organisations in both the Vedanta and POSCO cases. The first indications of such confrontation came from Odisha almost eight years ago when the Odisha government killed several adivasi protesters whose lands were being acquired by a Tata Steel Plant. This protest marked a watershed in the way in which neo-traditional movements coincided with other class based adivasi struggles. The subsequent POSCO and Vedanta struggles have been launched as rainbow coalitions between different class and community based organisations. They are borne out of resistance to land acquisition and dispossession of the tribal people to their own lands. The discourse of such protests has been diverse and over arching in character. It takes the form of both legalistic and as well as militant protest and expresses itself in diverse forms some of which are communitarian in character and others which emphasise modern democratic rights. One of the best examples of such types of protest were initially seen in the case of opposition to bauxite mining in Andhra Pradesh. Samatha, a local non-governmental group approached the high court to stop mining without the consent of the local Gram Sabha in 1995.[43] The court ruling, in the form of now famous Samata Judgement, became one of the main instruments in the hands of the resistance movements. Another example of sustained militant struggle is the anti-Vedanta movement which was supported by both scholars and activists. The villagers argued that protecting Niyamgiri was not merely a necessity for economic survival but also a matter of their cultural rights. Hence the trope of the Niyam Raja was used to mobilise all affected people of the area and also appeal to the Courts. The Courts ruled that the consent of the Panchayats [44] This victory led to the temporary stalling of the project despite police repression. In the case of POSCO too, the state sided with the company, but the local coordination

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[41] Archana Prasad, 'The Political Economy of Maoist Violence in Chhattisgarh' *Social Scientist* Volume 38 Number 3, March-April 2010.

[42] For a critique of the 'Maoist' strategy see Pushpinder Grewal, 'Indian Maoism: Flawed Strategy and Perverted Praxis' in Prasenjit Bose ed., *Maoism: A Critique from the Left*, Leftword Books, New Delhi, 2010.

[43] For more details see Archana Prasad, *Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas*, Leftword, 2010.

[44] Archana Prasad, 'The Vedanta Judgement: Significance and Implications' *Peoples Democracy* 28 April 2013.

committee. Posco Pratirodh Sangram Samiti, coordinated with all democratic and left forces to wage a protracted and continuing struggle.[45] Once again the state sided with the corporates and used repressive and intimidatory tactics to suppress the struggles. But the rainbow coalition between scholars, activists, mass organisations and the local committee have helped it to keep alive. These are just some examples of the developing conflicts and struggles in the adivasi regions. These continuing struggles also show that the impact of neo-liberal policies and the current form of corporate capital has widened the gap between adivasi working class and the adivasi elites. But the proletarianisation of the adivasis has also provided a window of opportunities to build a unity between community and class based struggles. This unity is essential to build an alliance against corporate capitalism.

In this context it is important to explore the important question of why it is necessary to reproduce the adivasi consciousness in the wake of the increasing consolidation of working class formation. The answer to this question lies perhaps in the changing nature of state interventions in the designated tribal regions. The withdrawal of the state from social welfare has in fact jeopardised the survival of adivasis in at least two ways. First, the decreasing allocations and restructuring of the tribal sub plan has ensured that the adivasis can no longer expect any help from the neo-liberal state as far as basic necessities are concerned. Public funds for tribal development have largely dried up and ministries like rural development, education and health are allocating less and less for tribal specific schemes. Hence any limited attempt at redistribution of benefits and wealth through welfare schemes for ensuring the social and livelihood security of adivasis has been reversed under the current phase of capitalism in tribal areas.[46] Second, the protective constitutional measures undertaken by the state for adivasi people are being diluted under the pressure of corporate capital. The dilution of the fifth and sixth schedules through repeated violations has only led to furthering the dispossession of adivasis. In this situation, the reproduction of the adivasi consciousness is essential to ensure that the legitimate rights of the adivasi worker are protected and defended against corporate capital.

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[45] For more details of these struggles see Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India, Adivasis and the Alumunium Cartel*, Orient Blackswan, 2010.
[46] Archana Prasad, 'Disinvesting in Tribal Development' *Peoples Democracy*, 1 April 2012.