Chapter - 1

Introduction

This dissertation is written in the turbulent times when the Adivasis in Kerala, like the indigenous people in many other parts of the world are engaged in a struggle for survival. The struggle for land rights had taken a violent turn with the police firing at Muthanga, Wayanad on 19-2-2003. The leaders of the Adivasis, including C.K. Janu were arrested and put in jail. The State repression of Adivasis continues with daily tortures and harassments in Adivasi colonies.

The dissertation draws its immediacy from the burning situation in Kerala. But, this is not a sudden crisis that has erupted into public consciousness. The Adivasi as figure has been there, constructed and reconstructed by the "mainstream" society. What is new is the countering of this by Adivasis themselves in a language that is accepted and legitimate with the mainstream society also.

The object of this research is this mainstream society, which I wish to name as dominant culture. Simultaneously, I am also looking at the Adivasi who is sometimes affected by the constructions of the mainstream, sometimes using it, sometimes countering it, very often negotiating with it. The word "dominant" signifies a difference in power - and that is what I also wish to evoke as far as the relation between the Adivasis and others are concerned.

To be more specific the dissertation examines the dominant group's construction of Adivasi identity. I have used Wayanad, Kerala as a specific instance to examine the problem. The Adivasi voice has served as a backdrop for this dissertation. Rather than an exercise in trying to express the "authentic" Adivasi voice, it attempts to be an exercise in listening, to various cultures which have constructed the Adivasi identity, including the Malayalee, upper caste, Hindu culture of which I am part. It is also
an attempt at reconstructing the academic culture which draws its life breath from the Western notions of the "primitive". I can claim a membership in that culture too.

Why this Dissertation?

This dissertation is written at a critical juncture for the Adivasis of Kerala. They were involved in a struggle in 2001 that they described as their last struggle for survival. The situation also raises pertinent questions regarding the category "identity" in general, especially subaltern identities and Adivasi identity in particular.

The question is whether Adivasi identity, like any other subaltern identity, is to be raised as a separate articulation. In fact, it is a Catch-22 situation for any subaltern identity politics. If the issue is not raised as an "Adivasi issue" the mainstream society will not notice particular oppressions that they have faced as a group. It will conveniently be swept under the carpet of "human rights issues". Yet if it is raised as an Adivasi issue, it will be relegated to the margins of popular mainstream discourses and remain there. That means, it will never be articulated as a national issue, or even issues relating to the wider society. This situation is not peculiar to the Adivasi issue but is faced by all the identity movements. What the identity movements might be asking for is the dismantling of the structure itself. But, the mainstream society very often reacts either by massive repressions or by token inclusions.

At this point, it is important to analyze the techniques by which the dominant groups construct any subaltern identity. As a non-Adivasi woman, it became imperative for me to understand my own culture's construction of one of the most marginalized of identities.

Defining Terms

I had entered the doctoral programme with the idea of studying the "tribe" in the English Department. Yet, getting into the topic of the dissertation, I discovered that the identity "tribe" immediately created problems. One of the questions which haunted me
throughout my research was asked at the beginning of my PhD admission itself. The question was "What is a tribe?" or "How do you define a tribe?"

It was with excitement and horror that I discovered that there is no essential definition of the term that I am working with. Various dictionaries of course assured me to the contrary; that the term did have definitions. They included such definitions like "any aggregate of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor". The origin was supposed to be from the Latin word "tribus" meaning "each of the three divisions of the Roman people representing the Latin, Sabine and Etruscan settlements."

All of them assured me of the present derogatory use of the word.

Yet, all that was less than a definition. It raised a whole lot of questions in my mind. Did any of the communities that I was familiar with as "tribes" fit into these definitions? On the contrary, didn't many of the communities who do not claim any status as tribes fit in perfectly under these specifications as tribes? This question of definition which doggedly followed me from the beginning of my research gave me many a sleepless night. Little did I know at the beginning stage of my research that huge structures of administrative machinery had been erected around the category without so much as a thin definition even to hang the weight!

Yet, there were clear distinctions between tribes and non-tribes as we know it. I knew intuitively, that a Parsi or a WASP couldn't be a tribe! There were some distinctions to be made. Later, the "derogatory" term in the dictionary led my way towards defining. There was a particular way in which tribes were seen—the origin of the derogatory feeling came from their primitivity and our modernity. Thus I felt, it was a wild goose chase to hunt for the perfect definition of the word. In fact, no such definition exists, since the category itself is constructed for specific purposes. It is clearly the examination of the notion of primitivity that might lead towards a contemporary understanding of how the dominant cultures look at tribes.
Various Terms to Denote the Concept

The various terms used for Adivasi also created a confusion. Later, this very confusion became the points which led me at least towards tentative conclusions. The myriad ways in which Adivasi has been seen is represented by the variety of terms available. For instance, they include terms like "savage", "primitive", "barbarian", "aborigine", "tribe", "Scheduled Tribe", "Adivasi", "indigenous people", "the fourth world", "girijan" or "vanavasi". Each term has its specific connotation and history. The self perceptions of these communities might vary from the meaning conveyed by some of these terms or many of them together. But, most of the communities see themselves is specific groups—like Paniyas, or Kurichias.

The terms savage, primitive and barbarian have been used by the nineteenth century anthropologists to describe non-European cultures that they thought represented a stage in human civilization. These are connected to the notions of modernity and progress that Europe had. If I have used the term "tribe" along with the above mentioned words in the first chapter, it is to connote this derogatory use of the term by the nineteenth century European academicians.

The word "Scheduled Tribe" comes from the administrative category of "tribe" which evolved through the British administrative system in India. They are the communities included as the Scheduled Tribe according to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution. When using the term "tribe" in chapter 3, I have used it strictly as an administrative category with no connotations of primitivity attached to it.6

The word "Adivasi", as used in the third chapter connotes the romanticized notion of the "tribe" with the noble savage myth attached to it in the post 80s context in India. Chapter 4 does have this connotation of the term.

I have retained the term in chapter 5, though I use the specific community name wherever possible. The term also has connotations of the political mobilization that the
Adivasis are undertaking right now all over India. I did not want to lose out on this meaning and have retained the term that the groups use to describe themselves politically. Wherever I have expressed my own views, I have retained the term “Adivasi”.

Rarely have I used terms like indigenous people to connote a universal political identity that is emerging among the communities termed like that. For the specific context of India and Kerala, I have not used the term. The term "aborigine" has been avoided because it is used only in relation to Australian indigenous populations. Strictly, it means, "from the sunrise" and should mark the autochthonous nature of populations, which Indian Adivasis cannot claim.

The Category of “Identity”

There are certain notions of identity that inform the dissertation. They are as follows:

1. It is relative. That means, one can define a particular identity only in relation to some other identity. That is, it exists in contrast. It is the "them" which defines the "us" and the "you" which creates the "me".
2. This "us" and "them" keeps changing according to circumstances. The non-fixed nature of identity thus comes into our perception.
3. Also, identities have various aspects which are constantly in dialogue with each other. Thus, a gender identity cannot exist in isolation from identities of tribe/race/caste, nation, age, sexual preference etc. Even when one foregrounds one aspect for analysis, it is often not theoretically wise to dismantle categories.
4. The definition of one's identity is often a statement about the existing hierarchies (power) in society. But, identity is seen not just as a reflection of power, but as a site for struggle and resistance as well. This is exactly why identities demand more theoretical attention also.
Organizing the Dissertation

The dissertation has been arranged according to the way in which the term dominant culture could be seen. Wayanad is a district in Kerala. Historically it belonged to the British Malabar province. The district is known for its fast depleting stretches of rain forests and the Adivasi population who stay in the district.

In a very local sense, historically the dominant communities would be the Hindu upper caste groups, (who own most of the land in the district), Jains, Chettis and Mappilah traders. There is also a strong Christian migrant population in Wayanad who settled there from the 1940s onwards.

No present is unconnected with its past. These local dominant groups are the dominant groups in Kerala as well. These groups are also connected through historical processes. When one examines "present" identities, one is confronted with a mosaic of happenings—in the present and in the past. This does not mean that there is a clear and unbroken flow through generations, or an evolutionary idea of a particular identity. Yet, one has to examine the past to understand the present.

Thus, the history of colonization in India, where the British gave their own ideas of modernity and primitivity, administrative forms becomes important in understanding any post-colonial Adivasi identity. In some ways, the present work can be described as an elaboration of what the term dominant is. It describes three forms of dominance—the Western conception of the term "tribe", especially its disciplinary articulation forms the second chapter. The idea of primitivity that is intertwined with the idea of the tribe is examined in this chapter. The stereotype of the primitive and its political implications are examined here.

The third chapter deals with the category as a modern one. The birth of the nation, India and the way the tribe is constructed here are the subjects of this chapter. The imagination of India as a conglomeration of castes, and the sharp division that
emerged with the tribe as outside caste is examined. The tribe that appears as a shadow to this "casted" India is brought to the foreground by examining the strands that construct this India. The methodology followed is an examination of colonial census records from the first All India Imperial census in 1872 to the beginning of the last century when the identities that finally were defined as the nation were being fixed.

The fourth chapter looks at one of the main ways in which the tribe is constructed in contemporary debates, both in Kerala and outside the state. Here I focus on the anti-modernity debates which emerged in the eighties that took the tribes as a site to critique modernity. I examine the figure of Verrier Elwin as portrayed by the theorist Ramachandra Guha in the 90s. Also, I examine K.J. Baby, a non-Adivasi writer who has taken up the issue of Adivasis in Malayalam literature to deal with the manifestation of these ideas in Malayalam.

The fifth chapter deals with self-constructions of the Wayanad Adivasis themselves. For this, I have dealt with some of their negotiations with modernity. I have taken changes in religion, a pervasive feeling of being "wronged" which many Adivasis share and some political movements for a detailed analysis in this chapter.

In the sixth chapter, I make a summary of the conclusions arrived at in the previous chapters and also point to the possibilities that a research like this can take.

Methodology

My methodology does not have a convenient name. Each chapter in that sense, evolved its own methodology. Very often, I have felt ashamed to admit that I do not have a name to call them. But, post-structuralism and the debates around the limitations of positivism as well as its reflections in the Humanities which simultaneously produced a questioning of the close reading techniques we were taught to learn gave me some amount of confidence.
To admit an embarrassing confession, it was not done deliberately to shock others or myself. It happened in the course of the dissertation. I was forced to take roads which I never thought I was either capable of or I would enjoy. Just to name a few of the things I was doing-reading the history of the construction of the notion of the primitive in the West, ploughing through forest department publications of the past 75 years ending just with Independence, going through census documents (again stopping with Independence) in Calicut archives, a field work (as the anthropologists call the phenomenon) lasting for more than 4 months in Wayanad, collecting the oral narratives of both Adivasis and non-Adivasis. I feel due to the multiplicity of the methodology, each chapter requires separate elaboration that I have attempted.

There are confessions to make as well regarding the material collected. Many researchers assure me that it is a common enough complaint that people keep coming back to: "Yes, I could have done better." This is a “Yes-I-could-have-done-better” confession section.

I have not looked at the major changes that have happened to Indian Adivasis after the writing of the constitution, where the Scheduled Tribes become an Administrative category. It required the going into the constitutional assembly debates that I could not manage to do. Thus, the post fifties scenario, especially in the national construction of the tribal identity, remains a weak point of the dissertation.

I have not scanned the Malayalam weeklies and magazines seriously and systematically for material on tribes. In my hurried visits home, I used to come across a sea of material in my house itself. This made me aware of the immense material available in Deepika, Mathrubhoomi or Manorama archives. I could not "exploit" them.

There is a more serious confession than lack of discipline and work. I suspect, I have not always been able to combine in my analysis various identities that were interacting in such a complex topic. If my focus was on the Adivasi identity (or the
dominant group's identity) I kept seeing myself forgetting gender. Moreover, though I
was aware that my own identity was shaping the dissertation at every point, I was not
able to bring out its import at every instance. They come out as flashes.

A note on the translation of Malayalam material. I myself have translated the
material from Malayalam and I have not indicated at each point specifically, especially
when I have used the oral narratives collected in the field. The documentation has
largely followed the MLA handbook, fifth edition. I do not have a separate "Works
Cited" towards the end of each chapter, but the original works from which the quotes
have been taken have been indicated in the "End Notes" itself. The complete reference
is given in the "Select Bibliography". Oral narratives have been documented as "Talk
with —" or "Interview with---" in the endnotes. I have appended three interviews as
well as the list of political groups in Wayanad.

Why Study "Tribe" in the English Departments?

Though it was the discipline of Anthropology that took the prerogative to
theorize and study the "primitive", these ideas percolated to all disciplines, including
literature. English Literature has always had its own set of primitive portrayals. Students
of the discipline are familiar with Good Friday and Conrad's famous journey into the
Heart of Darkness. Literature, like any other product of cultural representation has always
been a site of power play. Representation of the primitive has been especially laden with
power and has been part of the canonical texts of English Literature.

But there is one major difference in the way these representations were
perpetuated through these disciplines. Anthropology did this in the name of science,
whereas, English Literature did mis with the pretension of delving deep into the dark
recesses of human civilization and presenting these as Universal Truths. Yet, it is a fact
that both "art" and "science" have taken and given to each other. They continue to do
so.
The history of most of the academic disciplines we know of today can trace their roots to the Enlightenment modernity of Europe. English Studies evolves as a discipline quite late, and recent studies have traced the discipline's origins connecting it with colonization. It is not quite surprising that the "tribal" did not figure in any noticeable way in the English Department. They could not be the artists who would have produced great works of art, or critics who have torn them apart, or analyzed their aesthetic qualities logically.

Moreover, the "tribe" has been a subject of study in the Department for quite some time. G. N. Devy in his works has consistently brought the figure of Adivasi into focus, and very often from the English Studies perspective as well. His recent anthology, tries to introduce the Adivasi writing in translation to an English speaking audience.

But they did figure as representations. Moreover, the so-called literary representations and other representations shared a lot of things in common. In fact, the disciplinary boundaries seemed to blur when one reads into the politics of these representations. The "objective" representations on the ethnographic descriptions and the aesthetic descriptions of tribals in Literature seemed to draw from each other.

The narrative techniques which the Department has taught me, I found could be used in a variety of texts. Once the definition of "text" could include unconventional material, it did not just open up a Pandora's box in the English Studies discipline, but I feel, it also opened up new possibilities. Hitherto, "untouchable" subjects could be confidently dealt with in the discipline itself. I place my dissertation also in the not-so-novel tradition of studying culture in Literature Departments.
Notes:

5 Tharu, 1999, Hyderabad.
6 The administrative category itself may have such connotations when one traces its history.
7 For the politics of retaining the term “Adivasi” in contrast to the term “tribe” which has colonial connotations, see Omvedt, 2000.
8 This is not true of Jains and Wayanadan Chettis who cannot be seen as the dominant groups in the whole state, since they are found only in Wayanad.
10 Devy, 2002.