Chapter - 2

Constructing the "Primitive": A Short History from the West

One of the most paradoxical features of early twentieth-century was the way the new was equated with the ancient, the avant-garde with the atavistic.¹

Beyond Europe was henceforth before Europe... ²

This chapter examines the history of the concept of the tribe as constructed in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Europe. In the general scheme of the dissertation, this is the examination of one of the dominant groups in relation to the tribe—namely the West.

Any identity in postcolonial times, for that matter, has to talk to and sometimes talk against, the dominant Western Enlightenment constructions of identities. The resultant Victorian Anthropology of the nineteenth century, a carry-over of the Enlightenment philosophical tradition becomes important in the examination of the category "tribe". In this respect, the category shares similarities with any other modern concept. The indigenous people all over the world have been affected seriously by the phenomenon of colonization by the West. Whole cultures have been either wiped out or completely marginalized. Due to all this, the social constructions of the tribes do have a universal resonance and can be studied only by going into the Western dominant constructions of the tribe.

The tribe was constructed primarily as "primitive" by Western culture. Among a number of sites where the primitive was produced, the academia can claim its own share. The academic interest in the exotic and the primitive almost always combined with the colonization of these very people. Both factors together created the global notions of the primitive.
A number of related academic disciplines can be seen to have taken part in the production of the tribe. For example, the science of Geology that interpreted the different levels of geological strata to analyze the history of the region affected the study of the tribes seriously. The discipline of Ethnology and its later version of Anthropology, the "science" of Phrenology, or the study of human skulls, Eugenics, the study of race, Evolutionary Biology, and recently Genetics can all stake a claim in producing the tribe that we know of.

This chapter attempts—to borrow from the research methodology of the Social Sciences—a survey of literature and to locate the present dissertation in the ongoing discussions. A summarizing of the leading arguments in the purview of the study is given with critical analyses of the same. In other words, this chapter presents a reading of the critical works, which have looked into the construction of the tribe in the Western disciplinary context.

**The Construction of the Primitive**

The ways, in which the tribes all over the world have had their histories written, however diverse and non-universal they have been, illustrate some common features. The condition of many of the indigenous people all over the world has been described as containing the feature of the "primitive". The terms "tribe", "aborigine", "savage", and 'barbarian" have been used in this dissertation. There are of course obvious differences and connotations connected to each term. Yet, they point out to a common assumption. The terms mat are used in local languages to signify tribes also indicate this construction. For instance, in different parts of India, words like Kadan, Junglee, Kaliparaj etc. have been used to describe the tribal people. Though the words signify only the place of residence, the forest, it is usually used derogatorily and very often connotes primitivity. In English, a "barbarian" almost always has the connotation of a tribal person. Needless to say, these are usually negative stereotypes associated with the notion of tribe.
Apparently, positive versions of the same stereotype are seen in words like "nature's children", V'anavasi etc. These contrasting stereotypes have functioned as different ways of seeing the tribal people by the dominant, non-tribal cultures. These stereotypes, when examined, lead towards the history of the dominant group's gaze on them.

To understand the "primitive" then, it is necessary to understand it as a notion rather than as reality. The primitive as a notion inhabits a realm in the distant past of humanity. But since this very same notion is applied to gaze at contemporaneously existing societies, (which are clearly not primitive in that historical sense) it is necessary to deconstruct this all-pervading stereotype.

Disciplining the Primitive

The idea of the primitive has a long history. It is intimately connected to the various notions of race that have circulated in the Western imagination. Stocking traces some of the words that have been used to indicate the tribes to the origins of Western civilization itself. I quote from his work:

The cultural contrast implicit in the idea of "civilization" is surely as old as civilization itself. And some of the words by which it has been expressed go back to Greece and Rome. "Barbarian" derives from the Greek contrast between those who spoke intelligibly and those beyond the pale of civil life whose language seemed simply reiterative mumbling—notably the Scythians, who for centuries were the archetype of the barbarian nomads of the Eastern steppes. A second contrastive term derives not from language but from habitat: "savages" (from the Latin "sylva") were those who lived in the woods, rather than in the city—and who with the era of discovery, were more apt to be encountered by seafaring Europeans venturing West than to thunder out of the East on horseback.

Though it has had its pre-modern articulations, with modernity, the notion took on particular shapes. The term "tribe" was forced to bear a lot of theoretical weight (very often not justified) due to the peculiar social and intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century.
The discipline of Anthropology, along with many other disciplines, was one of the sites where these articulations took shape. As Adam Kuper says: "Speculations of the primitive society took a distinctive and novel version and crystallized with Anthropology between 1860s and 1870s."\(^7\)

It is true that Anthropology has been one of the most self-reflexive of the academic disciplines with a critical eye turned on itself in the recent past.\(^8\) Moreover, some of the anthropologists have been among the first to give up the notion of the primitive on which the foundation of the discipline was built. Kuper, for example, even goes to the extent of calling the notion of the primitive "an illusion."\(^9\) One of the ways in which this self-criticism happens is by going back to the origins of the discipline itself and re-reading what the construction of the primitive has been and what the role of the discipline has been in it. The following section draws heavily from this strain of anthropological writings in many ways.

The classification and objectification of the groups dubbed primitive have helped in justifying their colonization and continuing exploitation. Their colonization has even led to some of the groups being wiped out in a genocidal manner. At other times, they have at least been made into cheap labourers for the running of the system. Kaushik Ghosh, for instance, comes up with the constructions of primitivity in the "coolie narratives" of the late nineteenth century India and connects the way in which the image of the "primitive" has conveniently alternated with that of the exotic, classified object under study and that of the cheap labourer. According to him: "...colonial obsession with the primitive on the one hand reifying it through the display and classification of aborigines, and, on the other fetishizing that same aboriginality as a magical solution to the colonial demands for labour..."\(^10\)

The disciplinary incarnations, not just of Anthropology, but of other disciplines also have been of special significance to us in the academy. This has led to a mutual
sharing of ideas between the academicians and the other wings of colonial machinery. The dominant culture's construction of the primitive draws very centrally from this rendering.

It should also be noted at this point that there has been a stringent critique against seeing the history of any subaltern group only in terms of Western colonization. The framework that defines the dominant cultures as easily White and male and history as having begun for any modern category only with the Western Enlightenment is highly problematic. Taking this argument into consideration, primitivizing of tribals seems to be a wrong place to start. Along with this, or before this should have come the examination of dominant pre-modern cultures in this country's construction of the different groups now known as tribals. I follow G. Aloysius in his understanding of subaltern historiography. To quote him:

Imperialist historiography painted a grim picture of premodern society in the sub-continent as politically fragmented, socially anarchic, culturally decadent and economically stagnant. The situation of the labouring groups was shown as particularly pathetic: while in the only economic activity—agriculture—they were held everywhere in some form or other of slavery, an extreme and textual form of caste discrimination and oppression characterized all spheres of corporate life. Against this, the British rule was shown as the harbinger of peace and progress for all and a benefactor and liberator especially of under-privileged groups. Nationalist historians, on the other hand produced a diametrically opposite picture: the traditional India was seen to be constituted of self sufficient and harmonious village republics in which the different ascriptive groups fulfilled their duties according to their dharma based on natural tendencies; the relations between groups were cordial and complementary until the British came on the scene and sowed seeds of discord, competition and conflict.11

He rejects both versions of looking at colonialism and sees the continuation of the pre-modern forms of power in reforged ways in colonial times. This framework opens up possibilities of a different order. This means that we need not fall into the trap of giving the central agency only to British imperialism, but still see colonialism as important in constructing any post-colonial identity. Along the same lines, the present
dissertation sees tribal identity, like any other contemporary identity, as a modern category and rejects the popularly accepted premise of primitivity. In fact, it is seen that this primitivity is historical and has been attributed to the groups now called tribes at a particular point in history.

Once one accepts the modernity of the category tribe, colonization with its roots in Europe cannot be ignored. The deep changes, which identities went through to be remoulded in modernity, have direct connection with colonization. That does not mean, I repeat, that colonization has to be seen as a break—as the nationalist historians do; nor is it necessary to go to the other extreme and see it as a neat continuation of the pre-modern categories that comfortably fitted into modernity.

**Evolving the Primitive**

The interest in primitive societies has taken a distinctly different shape in the West after the latter part of the nineteenth century. This marks the immediate aftermath of the publication of the work on evolution, *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The work not only influenced Natural Science, but found its exponents in such diverse fields like Economics, Sociology and Anthropology.

But before going into a discussion on the evolutionist origins of the discipline which had immense influence over the destiny of the people named tribes, let us examine what the characters of this primitive society, as imagined by the discipline was.

**Kuper,** who worked on the nineteenth century anthropologists thinks that they drew the primitive society in the following colours:

1. The most primitive societies were ordered on the basis of kinship relations.
2. Their kinship organization was based on descent groups.
3. These descent groups were *exogamous* and were related by a series of marriage exchanges.
4. Like extinct species, these primeval institutions were preserved in fossil form, ceremonies and kinship terminologies bearing witness to long-dead practices.

5. Finally, with the development of private property, the descent groups withered away and a territorial state emerged. This was the most revolutionary change in the history of humanity. It marked the transition from ancient to modern society.\textsuperscript{13}

Though the suspicion and embarrassment about using words like "primitive", "savage" and "native" had started bogging the practitioners by the 1950s itself, they still subscribed to the essential idea behind the primitive. Dozier describes the primitive society, or the classical subject of anthropological study, as he understood it in the fifties as having the following characteristics:

(1) absence of a written language, (2) a relatively simple technology, (3) social institutions which are cast in a simpler mold, (4) smaller numbers, (5) relative isolation, and (6) societies whose cultures are in general characterized by slower rate of change.\textsuperscript{14}

When one analyses what the characters of this primitive society are that was imagined by the nineteenth century fathers of Anthropology another default society appears before us. That is the \textit{mainstream} society of the modern Europe. The primitive society was imagined to be the antithesis of "civilization". The impulse behind the imaginings of the primitive society was to see one's own society as radically different from the earlier one. In fact, the late nineteenth century intellectuals saw their own times as undergoing serious changes:

Europeans believed themselves to be witnessing a revolutionary transition in the type of their society. Marx defined a capitalist society emerging from a feudal society; Weber was to write about the rationalization, the bureaucratization, the disenchantment of the old world; Tonnies about the move from community to association; Durkheim about the change from mechanical to organic forms of solidarity. Each conceived of the new world in contrast to "traditional society"; and behind this "traditional society" they discerned a primitive or primeval society.\textsuperscript{15}
If the primitive society was "nomadic, ordered by blood ties, sexually promiscuous and communist", it was because the modern society was defined above all by the territorial state, the monogamous family and private property and the primitive society had to be imagined as the direct opposite of all this. \(^\text{16}\)

One of the main tenets on which this imagination of the primitive rested was that of progress. Society was supposed to be progressing in stages. The idea of progress rook upon itself many contemporary sciences and their vocabulary transferred them onto the study of "man".

The scholars, especially the social Darwinists, who had formed the discipline of Anthropology, were mostly influenced by the debates around evolution. The search for a primitive society was a very real adventure for them. Conjectures about early human civilization were drawn with impudence and not much proof.

The evolutionists (in their own way) were drawing from Darwin, or some popular interpretation of his theories. According to them, all species were seen to be evolving from the one-celled bacteria to the pinnacle of civilization—the rational human being. The same model worked for societies as well. Thus, the social evolutionists were conveniently translating some version of Darwin's theory into human societies. They decided that society evolved from simpler systems or organizations based on kinship ties, progressing towards a more complex organization of power and state systems based on social contract. The primitive society was thus imagined to be on a lower rung of the social evolution ladder, than say, "the developed" Western societies.

Almost all the anthropologists, who were contemporaries of Darwin are now clubbed as evolutionists. This includes Bachofen, Maine, Fustel de Coulanges, Lubbock, McLennan, Morgan and Taylor. But Kuper says that most of them were drawing from Lamarck, who used his own brand of social Darwinism, more than Darwin.
This idea of "progress" on which the evolutionists based their theory necessarily involved a judgment of the so-called older races, and along with it, the contemporary tribes, as inferior. All of human society was imagined to be moving towards a common destiny. In this imagination, different societies were placed in a pyramid like structure of progress with the Western cultures placed on the top and other societies given a place in the pyramid according to their nearness towards achieving the status of the Western society. To quote Morgan for instance:

The inferiority of savage man in the mental and moral scale, undeveloped, inexperienced, and held down by his low animal appetites and passions, though reluctantly recognized, is nevertheless, substantially demonstrated by the remains of ancient art in flint, stone and bone implements, by his cave life in certain areas, and by his osteological remains. It is still further illustrated by the present condition of tribes of savages in a low state of development, left in isolated sections of the earth's monuments of the past... 17

The early evolutionists even went to the extent of dividing the whole of human society, contemporary as well as historical into neat stages. Morgan as well as Taylor subscribed to the division of savagery, barbarism and civilization. As Taylor puts it:

...while the general tenour of the evidence goes far to justify the view that on the whole the civilized man is not only wiser and more capable than the savage, but also better and happier, and that the barbarian stands between... 18

These stages were not just seen as explaining the general condition of "man", but all human institutions, including family and the State. The doubts whether the ancient cultures were patriarchal or matriarchal which resulted in the anthropological debates between Maine and McLennan in the latter part of the nineteenth century is one such instance. 19 Both were drawing conclusions about ancient cultures by reading accounts of travellers in other countries and then forming opinion about ancient cultures. Darwin himself could have been the first person to distance himself from these theories. The evolutionists who based their arguments on the idea of progress would have been
disappointed to know that Darwin did not attribute any idea of progress or direction to evolution. According to Kuper, he had argued: "...natural selection worked upon more or less random individual variations."20

This would have been unacceptable to most of the evolutionists who interpreted Darwin's theories for the human society.

It was not just Biology with its theories of evolution that influenced Anthropology's construction of the primitive. The discipline of Geology had its own share to play in the complex invention of the primitive.

Sumit Guha tries to trace the disciplinary connection between Geology and Anthropology.21 He says that Geology had emerged as a major threat to the Christian orthodoxy by 1830s. This happened with the publication of Lyell's Principles22 that talked about the age of the Earth and thus undermined the creation myth. The proponents of racial Anthropology wanted to create a similar science. Ironically, here science was used to undermine claims of human equality, which religion, through a belief in the common origin of humanity was upholding. Racial Anthropology wanted to prove that different races of human beings evolved from different descents.

Moreover Guha goes on to prove that the concepts used in Geology, like the stratified rock system, became a favourite metaphor amongst Anthropologists to speak about human civilizations. Then the latest strata, and correspondingly, the newest race, came to represent progress, whereas the strata, imagined to lie at the bottom represented primitivity. This thinking was clearly racist in import:

21 The project was to create a science of man (anthropology) analogous to that of the earth (geology) and distinct from the less explicitly racist study of peoples (Ethnology). Ethnology in the 1830s was in fact linked with humanitarian dismay at the brutalities inflicted on African and Australian populations. Anthropology would see these as natural and inevitable consequences of race contact.
Ethnology as a discipline had connections with the Quaker and evangelical philanthropy. As Lively writes:

In 1838 the Aborigines' Protection Society was formed by, among others, Thomas Fowell Buxton, a Quaker who had inherited the mantle of Wilberforce as leader of the anti-slavery movement in Parliament. Alongside its "first object", which was to collect "authentic information concerning the character, habits and wants of the uncivilized tribes", went a commitment to evangelism as the only "effecual method to civilise" dark-skinned savage peoples. The Ethnological Society of London was formed in 1843 by the Quaker doctor Thomas Hodgkin, as an offshoot of the Aborigines' Protection Society. The formation of the Ethnological Society was symptomatic of a split within the Aborigines' Protection Society between those concerned with missionary work and those interested in "scientific" observation.24

Anthropology as a discipline comes as an effort to purge even the remains of the missionary zeal that were carried over in the Ethnological Society. Geology was their model for quite some time. Many members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science feared that giving the ethnologists recognition might compromise the cause of science for they were seen to be producing political or religious polemics.25 Later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in what can be described as a clear academic coup, the anthropologists who believed in the inherent superiority of the Western races took over the discussions from the ethnologists. This was clearly to make the humanitarian voice silent in the academy.26

Methodology has to follow theory. Thus in the comparative method, which many of the early evolutionary theorists adopted, the terminology used for comparison might seem almost offensive to the twenty first century reader who is familiar with the arguments raised against these stereotyping by the so-called indigenous people themselves. Unlike the new generation anthropologists, Morgan, and many others following him, used the scales of comparison that divided the whole humankind into neat stages of savage and civilized with the barbaric in between."
Though the discipline moved away from its evolutionary origins, the ideas of the primitive still seems to be haunting the world at large.

How the jump from the imagined primitive society was made to existing and contemporary societies of indigenous people is a wonder in history. The concept of time is especially useful as far as the contemporary "primitives" are concerned. Skaria, along the lines of Fabian’s famous concept of the Time and the Other™ points it out as the politics of time. If one accepts the notion of progress and defines the Western, White society as the most advanced, then some people, or groups of people, are seen to be removed in time as well. Since the present is defined as contemporary West, they are seen to be living in the past. The ways in which the West has constructed the primitive throws light to the particular "othering" processes that have been part of those constructions.

The Fear of the Other: The Primitive as Barbaric

The most common stereotype of the primitive is that of the barbarian—being removed in everyway from civilization. In the eighteenth century, this racism even went to the extent of not considering the Blacks as human and comparing these groups to the great apes. Words like "species", "race" and "kind" were used interchangeably in the eighteenth century. In fact, there were two schools of thought regarding human origins before Darwin conclusively proved the common origins of all humankind. They were monogenism, which believed in the common origins of all mankind and polygenism, which believed that different races were actually different species altogether and had different points of origin, respectively. The polygenists, who are now interpreted as racists, were in their times seen to be radical. This is because they were seen to be questioning the monogenist assumptions in the Bible. The discipline of physical Anthropology drew heavily from the pseudo-science of Phrenology based on the measuring of skulls of different races. Incidentally, one becomes surprised by the
persistence of race theories in the academy in general. The questions of Biology and race had found a resurrection in the twentieth century. This happened through discussions around the concept and existence of hereditary genes for personality traits in the biological sciences.\textsuperscript{32}

With the evolutionary paradigm firmly established in the later part of the nineteenth century, this comparison happened with the authenticity of science rather than religion. Consider for instance the words of John Hunt the founder of Anthropological Society of London in his lecture "The Negro's Place in Nature":

\begin{quote}
We have recently heard discussions respecting Man's place in nature: but it seems to me that we err in grouping all the different races of Man under one generic name, and then compare them with the anthropoid Apes. If we wish to make any advance in discussing such a subject, we must not speak of man generally, but must select one race or species, and draw our comparison in this manner. \textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

In most of the representations of the barbaric primitive, s/he always possesses outer markers, like looks, clothing, societal organisation, customs etc. The outer markers did not just mean superficial difference. They were used as indicators that led to other more important inner difference with the "progress" groups.

The first and most important marker is of course race. The looks of the aboriginal evoked so much curiosity (and perhaps disgust as well) among the Europeans. The Anthropological discussions try to mask this disgust in the endless objectifications around the size of the nose, the eye colour, texture of hair and other physical features of the aborigine. For instance, Thurston, following the example of his more illustrious anthropological predecessors writes in the beginning of the twentieth century about Todas thus:

\begin{quote}
The typical Toda man is above medium height, well proportioned and stalwart, with leptorhine nose, regular features, and perfect teeth. The nose is, as noted by Dr. Rivers, sometimes distinctly rounded in profile. \textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}
This should be read in comparison with the lack of any physical descriptions as far as "higher civilizations" are concerned. These lengthy descriptions of the primitive distance the viewer/speaker from the gazed object. The gazed other becomes the race and nothing but the race. Any specimen is fine. They are nothing but the body.

Description of clothing is one major way in which "culture" is signified. Lack of specific forms of dressing, especially if the dressing can be seen as scanty by European standards might be one way of naming the group as barbaric. In a similar way, ornaments, or lack of them, will be read as barbaric according to circumstances. Even in the late twentieth century the easiest way to signify a person belonging to a tribal group seems to be the lack of conventional clothing.

Clothes can also be read as a gesture that signifies a total abandon in sexual codes. The whole of primitive society has been seen as sexually loose, with as little of taboos around the free display of sexuality as possible. The White society has constructed itself as having pruned the instinctual urges and redirected them to safer and more controlled channels. The barbaric primitive is basically the one who is not able to, or will not control her/himself sexually. The special meaning of primitivity varies of course for the primitive man and woman. The extreme cases of sexual exploitation of tribal women by non-tribal men common in almost all tribal areas can often be traced to the legitimacy given to the stereotypes of the sexually loose primitive societies. This stereotype has also affected the way the primitive has been constructed. Thus, Engels quoting Morgan believes that in the ancient times the determination of who the father of a child was impossible. In the imagined primitive matriarchy, the lineage had to be determined only through the mother's line due to "sexual promiscuity". The whole debate around the patriarchal theory of human origins advocated by Maines and its counter claim by Morgan that primitive human society was actually organized around matriliney is a debate around primitive promiscuity as well. The controlling of sexuality
through monogamous marriages, which was also linked to property, was one of the major ways in which Western society has seen itself as civilized.

Yet another way to primitivize is to point out to the societal organization of these communities that will be read as "simple" in contrast to the State based power systems of "modern" cultures. The barbaric primitive is understood to be organizing her/his society based on instinctual relationships of blood and not on social contracts. This kin based bonding, though existing and very often idealized in the Western societies, is not given ideological legitimacy except with the immediate family. Almost all the ancient societies were of particular interest to the legal historians of the nineteenth century because the societies were seen to exist in a condition beyond State power.

The other point, which is seen to mark the barbaric primitive from the civilized, is her/his religion. Primitive religions are seen to be based on superstition and fear, rather than on a universal spiritual understanding, which is seen to be the organizing principle of the "higher races". The ritual based religions are seen to worship nature directly and not symbolically, like other religions. It is not an attempt to lead people towards a higher humanity, which is the prerogative only of the more developed religions. The studies, which have happened in the discipline, and some of which are still happening, betray these very White racist tendencies.

The methodology of research projects undertaken encouraged students to take up projects dealing with societal organization that they would look at employing an elaborate kinship terminology that marks the specialist's language from that of the layperson. The same kinds of descriptions are seen to continue when one talks about the twentieth century "aborigines" as well.

The notion behind these constructions of the primitive contains another related concept-the division between nature and culture. Nature was seen as wild, untamed and
dangerous. Culture on the other hand, was pruned, contained and sophisticated. Lively speaks in the context of Black culture in the eyes of Whites:

Seen positively, they are more authentic and less emotionally inhibited than Europeans. Seen negatively, they are closer to some inherent evil, some heart of darkness, in human nature.40

Along with the division between nature and culture, the notion of the primitive was also part of another related concept, which was actually the hallmark of Western modernity: Rationality and its “other”–intuition or emotion. In a world where rationality was the mark of humanity, and only one kind of thinking was seen as rational, it was impossible for cultures other than White culture to be called rational. Primitive society was definitely in the modern culture's imagination marked by a lack of rationality. As mentioned above, the societal organization was based on blood ties and not on contract. This becomes significant when one realizes that social contract is seen as that which makes the modern human being different from "brutes". The other defining characteristics of the primitive society like sexual promiscuity, religion based on fear of nature etc. have all seemed to highlight this very character of the primitive society.

From the above discussions, it might be clear that the primitive conceived as barbaric is the "other" of the Western society in every way. Such contrast which marks the dominant society as positive and the other as negative clearly betrays the fear of the other. In building the primitive as barbarian, what the dominant culture is doing is to build itself–as civilized.

The clear "othering" process that is at work also shows that the dominant culture is fearful of the "primitive". It is its threat at the difference that is evident in the process.

This fear of the other is not just the fear of difference. It is the fear of oneself. The primitive is so interesting and so loathsome precisely because s/he is seen as oneself.
Appropriating the “Other”: The Savage as Noble

Another way of seeing the primitive, again by the Western society after Enlightenment, is by invoking the figure of "the noble savage,". There are different ways in which the primitive was seen as noble. One way was the evangelical way of seeing the victimized aborigine instead of the evil barbarian in the eighteenth century. These portrayals surrounded the debates around the abolition of slavery. The abolitionists, "in a twist characteristic of evangelical Christianity—exalted victimhood to a state of masochistic nobility."41 Lively mentions the most dominant image of the Negro in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as the abolitionist medallion which silhouetted the figure of the kneeling slave, "manacled hands raised in supplication, framed by the words 'Am I not a man and a brother?'"42

In this portrayal of the pure victim who is noble in suffering, the actor as well as the audience is the White person. The abolitionists dealt with most of the questions raised by the racist portrayals by appealing to the mercy of the White society, mostly by evoking their religious sentiments. In these narratives, the main character is always the White, either portrayed as cruel or generous. The aborigine is shown as the passive recipient of either of these sentiments.

The abolitionists dealt with the "criticisms" of the White society against the so-called savages by very often not directly confronting them. A good example is the question of primitive promiscuity that they didn't even touch but just elided over. Only the victimization of the slave/aborigine is dealt with.

But, there is another very important way in which the "savage" has been portrayed as noble. This portrayal does not deal with the victimization of the "aborigine" at all. Instead, the "savage" is seen as more noble than the "civilized".

In this portrayal, the primitive is conceived as inhabiting a pure space before corrupt civilization happened. The primitive's figure here comes to represent again all
that modernity is not. Quite unlike the barbaric primitive, s/he is in a state of pure nature. This portrayal is apparently positive, compared to either the barbaric primitive or the victimized aborigine.

While the general way in which Enlightenment saw the primitive was as described in the previous section, the more complex reaction was that of romanticizing the same things that were degraded. The most famous exponent of the idea is supposed to be Rousseau.\textsuperscript{43}

The same binaries that informed the barbaric primitive also inform the noble savage, but the meanings apparently change and should be read as the opposite. The binary of nature and culture plays an important part here. But, apparently, the hierarchy is reversed in favour of nature, instinct and community ties. The tribe still stands for all that modernity is not—but with the positive quality which is invested in the imagined tribe rather than culture.

In this scheme of things, there is a fallen tribe and an unfallen one. The unfallen tribe, when one analyzes the concept, is nostalgically invoked to fill in some void that the invoker her/himself feels in modernity. Thus, the community ties of the savage are invoked to comment on the alienation that the modern man feels in the city. The pure instinctual way in which "man" and god interact in tribal religion is seen to be the unsullied communion with nature, whereas the rationalists would call it primitive superstition. Sexual promiscuity, by these theorists, is understood to be the non-existence of oppressive customs that bound sexuality with private property.

The stereotype of the idealized tribe can also be deconstructed to yield an essentialized picture that speaks more about modernity than about tribes. There is thus a connection, which is usually drawn between the present constructions of the tribes as noble savages to the Romantic Movement in Europe.\textsuperscript{44} The Romantics were searching for unsullied corners of the world, be it the village, the folk, the tribe or nature itself. We
can place these constructions in the context of profound changes that were happening in eighteenth century Europe. Modernity with its emphasis on the material and its slogans of equality, fraternity and liberty, disturbed various fronts. Industrial revolution had brought about the collapse of the feudal order. Along with material changes, there was the construction of a new kind of self—the individualistic person emerging from the communitarian past. This individual did not experience kinship or regional affinities, nor was s/he bound by them. This condition led to the formation of the alienated self.

At this point, it is not quite surprising that the tribe emerged as a site of unsullied human interaction with each other and nature. The philosophy of cultural primitivism was the result of the desire of the modern West for its own unproblematic mythical past. Lovejoy and Boas define it as "...the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it." But, while civilisation desires, it also condescends. Here also, the framework of the adult-child works. This stereotype was used by the racist theorists who portrayed the tribes as barbaric. It is the adult West condescendingly gazing upon the child tribe with nostalgic desire that we encounter in the noble savage notion.

Moreover, the ideal notion of the tribe will never have any connection with living communities. In fact, these communities are supposed to be frozen in time. Any display of dynamism in these communities, which allows them to survive will be read as a corruption of the ideal state. Thus, the eternally child-like, eternally natural tribe exists only to be idealized theoretically, (but materially exploited) by a nostalgic modernity hunting for ideal others. This is clearly the politics of appropriation of the "other." In Sangeeta Kamat's words:

Such a theorizing predicated as it is on an image rather than on actually existing situation has allowed both for a romance with, and a rejection of tribals. The modern subject's nostalgia for a "lost" state of freedom, on the one hand, and its censure of the non-modern, on the other, coalesce around this image.
Let us examine Rousseau, supposed to be the originator of the idea of the "noble savage" for a more detailed analysis.

We understand that the French Philosopher embodies to a certain extent all the contradictions connected to the noble savage idea. It can be proved beyond doubt from *The Social Contract* itself that he never meant a "return to nature" in any practical way. The primitive state invoked is in contrast to modern society. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau develops a contrast between natural existence and civil society. In a neat binary fashion it can be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Existence</th>
<th>Civil Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instinct</td>
<td>Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amoral</td>
<td>Moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appetite</td>
<td>Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Liberty</td>
<td>Possession based on personal power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Strength</td>
<td>Civil liberty, secure proprietorship based on respect for the law, general will.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just to put any of our doubts at rest, one only has to know what Rousseau meant by appetite. I quote from *The Social Contract*. "The mere impulse to appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law, which we prescribe to ourselves, is liberty."4

So, it becomes amply clear that Rousseau never meant any comparison where the modern Western civilization would be seen in any bad light. In fact, he makes it clear in his own words:

*Although in this state [civil society], he (sic) deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great, his ideas so extended, his feelings so ennobled, and his whole soul so uplifted, that did not the abuses of this new condition often degrade him below which he left, he would be bound to bless continually the happy moment which took him from it forever, and instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man.*48

This is one way to critique the noble savage idea—that the proponents of the idea itself did not live up to it. Thus, Rousseau can be critiqued for never wanting to live up to
his own ideals—that the proponents of the noble savage themselves were advocates of civilization.

Another way is to deconstruct the idea. One can do this by exploring what are the binaries on which the idea is based. They are the binaries of wilderness/civilization, savage/modern, instinctual/rational etc. and see that one cannot exist without the other, that the division between the two is apparently fostered for the perpetration of power of one of the groups. Thus, it becomes clear that the “primitive” is a construction of modernity, rather than independently existing. The particular meanings associated with the "primitive" become intelligible only in modernity. The perpetuation of this binary depends upon the essentialising of the primitive and the modern.

Regarding the particular binary of the primitive and the civilized—it has now been proved beyond doubt that the ideal primitive does not exist and the primitive was never what s/he has been conceived of.

This has had far reaching effects on the groups called primitive. Idealization sees to it that these groups are seen to be valuable only if they remain in a non-modern state. Yet, in practical life, modernity does come to them affecting their lives. There are even studies which prove that the examples of ideal primitives which have been unearthed through enthusiastic scholars very often disregard their actual histories. Sumit Guha quotes a study about the San people of Africa who have long been cited as Neolithic survivals till the 70s. In his words:

Edwin Wilmsen has convincingly demonstrated that their excision from history was due to the nineteenth century European search for "specimens" of the savage hunting stage. By a brilliant rereading of both literary and archeological sources, he has shown how the apparent isolation of these peoples at the beginning of the present century, far from being a primeval condition, was a consequence of the immediately preceding collapse of trading networks exporting ivory, ostrich feathers, and other commodities to the Western market. So it emerged that peoples with a far simpler political organization and more limited political repertoire than that of the bulk of the scheduled tribes of India were nonetheless the product of prolonged interactions with larger regional
and continental social systems, and their primitiveness was externally defined and enforced.\textsuperscript{49}

Guha's own study proves that the groups now named "tribes" in India have not been the idealized noble savages, but \textbf{historical} groups which have been negotiating with powers-that-be at \textit{various} points in history.\textsuperscript{50} In the section titled "Identities and Aspiration: Not Noble Savage But Savage Noble" he finds that the references about Bhil ruler Umaji Raje is a complex documentation of bargaining for more status, both ritual and material with the higher castes as well as the British. This behavior is anything but that of the noble savage in close communion with nature!

\textbf{In} the twentieth century, proponents of certain schools of ecology, (especially of the deep ecology variety), have resurrected the "ecologically noble savage"\textsuperscript{51}. These sentiments are seen \textbf{in} the construction of tribes as living in close harmony with nature and knowing the best ways to preserve nature.

The critique of the "noble savage" has come from two sides. One group that is disappointed that the tribes are not exactly living up to the expectations bestowed on them. The next group which questions the very basis on which the noble savage idea is built.

The conservationists who are disappointed with the tribes include environmentalists like Redford.\textsuperscript{52} The other group, which critiques the idea of the ecologically noble savage, complains that in all these arguments, these groups can never fulfill the responsibility that is vested on the tribes. The tribes are burdened with keeping up an imaginary pre-modern lifestyle. The examination of the history of this category proves beyond doubt that the desires and anxieties of the already "modern" are pegged on the figure of the "savage". Moreover, these groups are not seen as people with histories (and very often histories of resistance).\textsuperscript{53} The vision that sees them as embodying critiques of modernity and nothing else is problematic in itself.\textsuperscript{54}
Also the specific history of the term "noble savage" reveals its connection with the racist views of one branch of Anthropological institution in England in the nineteenth century. Ter Ellingson proves that it was not Rousseau who used the term. It was attributed to Rousseau by Crawford, an Anthropologist of the late nineteenth century England.

As mentioned earlier, the earlier form of Anthropology was the discipline of Ethnology which had humanitarian and anti-racist agendas. They drew inspiration from the Quaker philosophy and were horrified at the humanitarian disaster that was happening in the New World as well as Australia. The Anthropological Society of London was formed by White supremacists in an academic coup by hijacking the platform from the Ethnologists. The myth of the noble savage had its own role to play in the perpetuation of racism in the name of "science".

Conjecturing the motive behind Crawford for attributing the myth to Rousseau, one has to understand the context in which the paper which first used the term, and which attributes this to Rousseau was presented. Ellingson proves that Crawford wanted to show the abolitionists and the human rights activists in a bad light. He wanted to prove that they were living in a fool's paradise. The idea that irked him to no end was the idea of universal human equality. That all races can be conceived as equal was threatening his racist imagination. He attacked any scientific or religious idea that was based on this argument. The attacks from Crawford were of course in the name of science. The new "science" of Anthropology provided a neat ground to base his arguments.

The supporters of human equality, including supporters of a common ancestor for the human race, were all placed in the category of Roussean believers in the myth of the noble savage. When the abolitionists spoke about human rights in scientific and social science seminars, they were made to be advocates of a pre-modern paradise in
which the savage was nobler than the civilized White man. This myth of the pre-modern paradise was easy to refute and it was difficult for White do-gooders to counter. They surely did not want to say that White culture was better off than indigenous cultures. That would be racist, and the Ethnological society was based on anti-racist sentiments. Yet, to go to the extent of romanticizing the tribal way of life was also dangerous. This did not strike the reformers at that time.

They just entered the debate in Crawford's terms. Then they had to defend a myth—the myth of the noble savage. Instead of countering Crawford's words as an irresponsible parody of the quest for human equality, the White do-gooders in the late nineteenth century England also started actively perpetuating the myth and attributing the words to Rousseau. This gave Crawford enough room to counter a myth he himself had perpetuated in quite scientific terms.

This does not mean that the responsibility of creating the stereotype of the primitive lay only on the shoulders of the academicians or intellectuals. As Pickering points out, it was reflected in such cultural forms as Impenal exhibitions during the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{55} The effects of this Academic myth-making on indigenous people themselves have been quite serious. They are as follows:

1. They are exoticised, but that has not prevented the world from exploiting the indigenous peoples. In fact, exploitation thus has been part and parcel of exoticization.

2. The indigenous peoples have been seen as expendable, for the primitive existing in this evolved state should have become extinct. If they are exterminated it is only nature's way and not the responsibility of the society.

3. These attitudes have coloured local perceptions of tribes all over the world.

4. The dominant culture comes out as modern, advanced etc. due to these myths.
5. In the noble savage myth, progress is apparently critiqued. But that would place the discourse on their rights by the indigenous peoples themselves as corrupting modernity. The modern societies, though already "corrupt" come out as adult in comparison with the tribal societies that look "childlike" in contrast. Thus, these stereotypes lead to a hollow idealization of the tribal society that makes it easily exploitable.

6. This is the politics of *appropriation*. In many ways, when there is a hollow kind of idealization, the perpetuator of oppression is freed of guilt of actually looking down upon the groups s/he is exploiting.

When the anthropologists were searching for the elusive primitive society and finding the remains of that in living cultures, they were engaged in a search for their own selves. They were trying to draw some meaning about the serious changes in which they found themselves. It was necessary to classify and place them. Either the search was undertaken in a self-congratulatory mode, or it was undertaken in the desperate mode of searching for an alternative for the major changes that were disturbing the settled *worldviews*. It was a search for their own roots.

The questions about the primitive have been always asked as universal questions of all mankind! As to how the man behaves when left alone to himself. Is he selfish? Or is he free? This dichotomous way of seeing is expressed in the barbaric primitivity and the free noble *savage—two* apparently opposing stereotypes about primitives.

But they both agree on the basic *question—that* there is a state of primitivity. The way in which this question can be tackled is by understanding that the question is wrong. First of all, how do we find out if there is a "pure" state beyond culture? What is the compulsion that is driving one to imagine that condition? Isn't this imagination itself cultural? The other way is to say that the present people who have been dubbed
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primitive and who have to bear the weight of being so for the moderns, is not exactly the right material to analyze "man" in his state of nature.

This chapter thus concludes that the category tribe is a modern category. By tracing its story through the nineteenth century and its construction of the primitive, what is attempted is to prove that the category was an invention of modernity. The next chapter examines the particular articulation of this category in the Indian context. This chapter sets the ground to analyze the category in the specific context of the Indian nation as a modern category.

I would like to end by quoting the guru of evolution, Darwin responding to the contemporary "savages" he encountered in Tierra del Fuego.

The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors... For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey... as from a savage.56

The construction of the primitive was more a self-examination journey for the White Western civilization—the primitive being the site on which modernity was pretending to question itself. If the other is feared, it is also the other in oneself.
Notes:

5. These are words in Malayalam, Hindi and Gujarati respectively. Kaliparaj means "the black people." Hardiman, 1996, 198.
6. Anthropologists in the twentieth century have been increasingly aware of the political connotations of the word "primitive" and "native" usually used to describe their subjects. For instance, see Dozier, 1956, 187.
7. See Rosaldo, 1989; Marcus and Fischer, 1986 and Englund and Leach, 2000 for a discussion on the identity of the anthropologist affecting the data. See Kahn, 2001 for a counter critique of these, especially the latter work's theoretical positions.
8. The tide of the work is The Invention of the Primitive: Transformations of an Illusion.
12. Dozier, 1956, 188.
17. Taylor, quoted in Dozier, 1956, 189.
27. Fabian, 1983.
29. Edward Long, a West Indian planter, writes in 1774 that the "Negros and orangutans" fill the gap in the great chain of being where the European figures as the pinnacle of creation. See Lively, 1999, 38.
30. Lively, 1999, 47.
31. The result of the Human Genome Project finally disproved these connections conclusively. See Radhakrishna, 2001: 1.
32. This is in spite of Darwin's meories that proved that all human beings are evolved from a common ancestor. Hunt quoted in Lively, 1999, 106.
34. If body is objectified at all, as far as the European culture is loosing its inhibitions on clothing and swimsuits have an advertisement value of 'high culture' in the West, clothing (defined as excess of it)
suddenly seems to acquire connotations of primitivity. Thus, *burkha* attaches to itself notions of Muslim barbarism. This does not quite contain the tribal connotations of primitivity though.

38 One is reminded of the whole genre of semi-pornographic movies in Malayalam which use an imagined tribal setting to show the half exposed bodies of women.

39 "The rediscovery of the original mother-right gene as the stage preliminary to the father-right gene of the civilized peoples has the same significance for the history of primitive society as Darwin’s theory of evolution has for biology, and Marx’s theory of surplus value for political economy." Engels, 1976, *Vol. III*, 201.

40 Lively, 1999, 55.

41 Lively, 1999, 55-56.

42 Lively, 1999, 57.

43 Ellingson refutes that Rousseau is the originator of the idea of the noble savage. Refer to the following section in this chapter itself. Ellingson, 2001.

44 Ellingson says that this originary point is not quite correct. He traces the idea to renaissance times and a century and a half after Columbus and he says this happened due to a fusion of "classical mythology with the new descriptions that were beginning to be conceived by scientifically minded writers as 'observations,'. In these representations the savage man was noble because he could hunt and was warlike — both privileges accorded to noble men during that time. See *Ellingson*, 2001, 11-12.


47 Rousseau, 1950, 196.


49 Wilmsen, quoted in *Guha* S. 1999, 433-434.

50 See *Guha* S. 1999, 150-163.


53 Nandini Sundar warns of being nostalgic about the resisting Adivasi in her work. See *Sundar*, 1997, xv.

54 Chapter 4 deals with a specific manifestation of this idea in contemporary Kerala culture.


56 Darwin, quoted in Lively, 1999, 120.