Essay

Incarcerated Imaginaries? Discourses of Indigeneity and Adivasi Transformations in the Satpura Hills, Central Indian Tribal Belt

Budhaditya Das
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi

Introduction

The climate pact signed by almost 200 countries at the Conference of Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland, includes halting and reversing deforestation as a critical mitigation measure to address the climate crisis. As part of this initiative, nations, philanthropists and donors committed 1.7 billion USD to support the role of indigenous communities as guardians of forests and nature.[1] Two days later, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his speech at the Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas[2] celebrations at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, by commenting on a song and dance performed at the event:

> The words used in this song and dance contain the essential meaning of life. And this has been imbibed by my Adivasi brothers and sisters who spend their lives in the forest.

He went on to recount the number of schemes initiated by the national government for the well-being of Adivasi communities, including the scheme to guarantee a minimum support price on forest produce (called the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana[3]) and the grant of 2 million forestland titles under the Forest Rights Act. In policymaking circles from Glasgow to Bhopal, the well-being of indigenous communities and forest ecosystems has been tied intimately, with one inconceivable without the other. The anthropologist Alpa Shah refers to the representation of Adivasi cultures as locked in land and in harmony with nature as *eco-incarceration.*[4] In her ethnographic work on Jharkhand, Shah demonstrates that the idea of rootedness in land persists among policymakers and indigenous rights activists despite long histories of mobility, shifting settlements and contemporary patterns of labour migration in the state. This article examines the implications of such eco-incarcerated representations for an Adivasi community in the Satpura hills of central India. Considering the agrarian and rural transformations occurring in the Satpura hills over the last three decades, the article considers the limits of eco-incarceration for politics and policymaking for Adivasi citizens.

The article is divided into five sections. Section 2 focuses on the concept of eco-incarceration and traces its presence and critique within discourses of indigeneity. Section 3 introduces the Satpura Hills located within the Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB), where the primary fieldwork for this article was carried out. Section 4 draws upon this ethnographic fieldwork and underlines key transformations occurring in the forest villages of Satpura hills, which have shaped the relationship of Adivasi communities with land, forest and agriculture in the region. The concluding section of the paper (Section 5) dwells on the dissonances between the discourse of eco-incarceration and Adivasi aspirations to be less poor and become commercial farmers. I argue that the eco-incarcerated imagination of forest and conservation policies invisibilises the agency and effort of this group of citizens to escape the "savage slot".[5] Finally, I suggest that in the wake of rural transformations that are occurring across CITB, activists and scholars of indigeneity should rethink their assumptions about upland societies and their interactions with agrarian environments.

Tracing Eco-Incarceration in Discourses of Indigeneity

The social, legal and political terminology of "indigenous peoples" has become a self-evident category in the last four decades despite contestations around its meanings, referents and boundaries. Four decades of transnational activism, legal protections and political struggles have lent a power and promise to the concept that is now anchored to visions of alternative futures and more sustainable ways of living on a warming planet. Tracing

the global rise of indigenism, Ronald Niezen notes that the concept "refers to a primordial identity, to people with primary attachments to land and culture, "traditional" people with lasting connections to ways of life that have survived from time immemorial".[6] Even though scholars have contested the validity and applicability of the concept to communities with divergent histories, Amita Baviskar argues that the concept has retained its public acceptance and has become a "social fact".[7] Like most other identity categories, indigeneity too is based on classification and ideas of similarity and difference. The ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) emphasizes the distinctiveness of indigenous peoples "from other sections of the national community" and their status as original inhabitants of colonized territories. Subsequent scholarship on the communities of Africa and Asia has emphasized the shared history of colonial and postcolonial subjugation and marginalization (oppressed peoples rather than first peoples) as being essential to indigenous identities.[8]

In India, the state does not recognize any group or community as indigenous, sidestepping the claim of original inhabitants for tribal communities and preferring the constitutional classification of Scheduled Tribes.[9] The term Adivasi[10] is widely used as a term of self-reference by tribal communities of central India and signifies their political struggles for land, resources, territory and claims-making vis-à-vis the state. From the 1990s onwards, a number of tribal political movements have laid claims to the indigenous status in order to force the state to adhere to international safeguards against dispossession and cultural marginalization.[11] There is a lively scholarly debate about the politics of the term Adivasi and its comparative value vis-à-vis other terms like tribal (*janjati*), forest dwellers (*vanvasi*) and indigenous communities.[12] The 118 million people approximately who are identified as members of the Scheduled Tribes are considered to be indigenous in their respective states and regions, with the term Adivasi usually reserved for communities in the Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB). For Adivasis in India, as with indigenous communities globally, the discourse of indigeneity maps on to the broad frames of *nature*, *culture* and *territory*. For instance, an international civil society report claims that "the distinguishing features of Adivasi peoples are their special relationship to their territories and the relationship between the individual, community and nature".[13] Eco-incarceration emanates from the representation of an unchanging association with nature and territory, an association that does not take into account transformations in political economy and society.

The idea that indigenous communities live in harmony with nature can be traced back to the Romantic ideologies in industrial Europe, conservation movement in 19th century North America and the Orientalist imaginations of colonizers in countries like India.[14] The celebration of the primitive and of the "wild" tribes was an element in the discursive classification and remaking of identities of tribes and castes in colonial India.[15] In the second half of the 20th century, environmental movements in the global North and South sought to rework this idea into an action programme for nature preservation that emphasized the environmentalism of poor and indigenous communities.[16] Cultural ecologists and anthropologists studying resource use in indigenous societies in Africa and North America drew upon ideas from equilibrium ecology to underline practices of prudence in these societies. Thus was born the figure of ecologically noble savage, wherein indigenous communities were represented as the original conservationists and as guardians of tropical biodiversity. The knowledge systems and livelihood practices of hunting and gathering groups, sacred groves and cultural beliefs of forest-dwelling communities have been showcased as examples of ecological wisdom and stewardship.[17] Environmentalists and indigenous rights movements have tapped into this rhetoric of the ecologically noble savage to mobilize transnational support for local struggles.[18] Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) and indigenous resource management strategies have become instruments for conservation organizations, bolstered by the argument that "conservation biologists and indigenous peoples are natural allies".[19] In the field of conservation, Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDP) and Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) have become popular policy vehicles that draw strength from ideas of indigenous conservation and build upon collaborations between NGOs and indigenous communities.[20]

In the debate over representations of indigenous identity and environmental politics, there have been several criticisms of eco-incarceration. Paul Nadasdy argues that framing the complex values, beliefs and practices of indigenous communities in terms of Euro-American values of environmentalism and conservation is unhelpful and misleading.[21] The resource use practices of several communities may not meet the criteria of conservation as strictly defined by conservation biologists.[22] Others have pointed to the political value and strategic deployment of essentialized identities by indigenous communities in their struggles for rights, resources and territory. For example, the solidarities and alliance between environmental activists and Amazonian Indian leaders in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s created opportunities for social movements, political parties, conservation organizations and multinational companies to tap into the global ecological imaginaries towards

varying outcomes.[23] Members of the Gaddi pastoral group in north India have deployed the discourses of backwardness, tradition and authenticity in their struggle for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe in order to make redistributive claims (employment and education) upon the postcolonial state.[24] Similarly, in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, the political movement for a separate state reinvented Adivasi cultural traditions and successfully deployed them to assert their rights over territory and natural resources.[25] In central India, on the other hand, the eco-incarcerated ideas of urban, middle-class activists participating in a tribal trade union movement differed significantly from Adivasi conceptualizations about sustenance, migration and the shift to non-land based livelihoods.[26] The anthropologist Tania Li straddles a middle ground arguing that a group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous is neither an invented tradition nor borne out of timeless attachments. Rather, it is "a positioning that draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle".[27] Following her work, Dorothy Hodgson analyses indigeneity claims by the Maasai in Africa as *positioning* and a contingent product of agency and the cultural and political work of articulation.[28] However, Tania Li also points to the dilemmas of occupying the "tribal slot" and the land and resource rights that are predicated upon a politics of difference. Indigenous rights linked to demonstrated difference and ecological stewardship in postcolonial societies are often a "pale version of rights that other citizens effectively enjoy" and places limits on claims by locating them within particular fields of power.[29]

Satpura Hills in the Central Indian Tribal Belt

The Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB) is spread across nine states, with nearly 370,000 square kilometers in these states covered by forests (Table 1). Trees, scrub and vegetation cover an area roughly equal to Japan in the CITB and larger than any individual state in India. Much of the politics and policymaking in these forests revolve around trees, tigers and tribals. The interests of the human are pitted against the non-human in popular discourse, and Adivasis are key protagonists in the struggles to conserve or conquer nature. Adivasi citizens are the poorest among all social groups in India, according to indicators of income, poverty and nutrition, consumption and ownership of assets, health and mortality.[30] Many of them – not all – live in villages, hamlets or settlements that are in close proximity to forests in hilly and upland areas of the CITB. Spatially speaking, a majority of Adivasis live in small pockets or enclaves within larger districts and regions that are predominantly non-tribal. There were 257 "tribal" districts in India in 2011, where the tribal population was at least as high as the national average. Out of these, 237 districts were either forested, or hilly or dry, and together they accounted for 80% of the total tribal population of the country.[31] Within the CITB, Figure 1 shows the distribution of average forest cover (as a percent of geographic area) and the percentage of tribal population in all districts. The districts which have 30 to 80% tribal populations also have greater than 25% average forest cover – much higher than the national average (up to nearly 40%). The difference between forest cover in the tribal districts and the non-tribal districts within the CITB can be seen in Table 2. While the average forest cover is only 9.35% in the non-tribal districts, it is 27.03% in the tribal districts.

Table 1: Forest Cover in the CITB (2017)

States in the CITB	Forest Cover (in sq km)	Forest Cover (as a percentage of Geographic Area)
Andhra Pradesh	37,258	22.86
Chhattisgarh	59,772	44.21
Gujarat	21,647	11.03
Jharkhand	23,605	29.61
Madhya Pradesh	94,689	30.72
Odisha	61,204	39.31
Rajasthan	32,737	9.57
Telangana	26,904	24.00
West Bengal	11,879	13.38
Total	369,695	

Table 2: Forest Cover in Tribal and Non-Tribal Districts

	Tribal Districts	Non-Tribal Districts
Number	140	83
Average Forest Cover (as percent of Geographic Area)	27.03	9.35
Average Dense Forest Cover (as percent of Geographic Area)	15.33	4.33

The geographical apposition of forests and tribal communities becomes an important element in the eco-incarcerated imaginaries of Adivasis in the CITB. This became evident during the researcher's long-term fieldwork in Harda district in southern Madhya

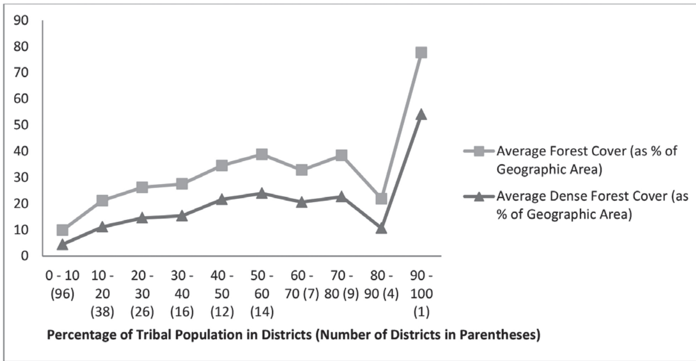

Figure 1: Average Forest Cover and Tribal Population in CITB Districts

Figure 2: Farming in the Forest in Satpura Hills

Pradesh.[32] The uplands of Harda district are part of the Satpura hills that run all along the southern boundary of the state. A major part of Harda district however lies in the valley of the Narmada River (which flows along its northern boundary) and the district's fertile black soil and irrigated agrarian landscape are a sharp contrast to the forested hills that lie in its southern zone. The forests in the Harda hills are classified as dry deciduous forests, with teak (*Tectona grandis*) as the dominant tree species in the landscape (See Figure 2). The management of teak forests in these hills with the objective of commercial forestry has shaped its landscape since the colonial period.

In order to meet the labour needs of commercial forestry, colonial officials established "forest villages" in the reserved forests of central India towards the end of the 19th century. These were unique technologies of rule, villages where the residents were given minimal land for subsistence and had to compulsorily work for the forest department or face the threat of evictions. The colonial discourse of racialised occupational hierarchies meant that Gonds, Korkus and "other jungly tribes" who were supposed to be "inferior cultivators" and "habituated to extracting forest produce" were settled in these villages. The processes of exclusion and dispossession that had begun a century ago had trapped many of the landless and poorest Adivasis in a situation where they were willing to accept the harsh conditions of tenure and residence in forest villages. There were around 5,000 forest villages in India with more than 200,000 Adivasi families at the time of Independence in 1947. Seven decades later, there are 2,474 forest villages distributed across 12 states, with Madhya Pradesh having the largest number of such villages (893). The Gond and Korku Adivasis form an overwhelming majority of the population in 45 forest villages in Harda district. Unlike ordinary villages and agricultural land elsewhere, cultivated and residential land in forest villages is still classified as Reserved Forest, and villagers cannot own, buy, sell or mortgage "forest land". Instead, they hold inheritable but inalienable land titles under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

In the next section, drawing upon the researcher's ethnographic fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, this article will focus on agrarian transformations in four forest villages in Harda district. The four study villages were chosen as sites for fieldwork because they were well-connected to the Harda plains with cement and concrete roads and have begun to acquire, if erratically and unevenly, access to commodity markets, electricity connections, sources of irrigation and state subsidies for agriculture. They are at the forefront of the agrarian transformation that is ongoing in this region, and hence are an important window to understand changing livelihoods and cultures in the uplands. During fieldwork, I interacted with a large number of farmers in every village, elderly residents, local community leaders, Forest Protection Committee (FPC) members, school teachers, foresters and other state officials.

Adivasi Transformations in the Satpura Hills

This section argues that the relationship of Adivasis with the forests in the Satpura hills can only be understood by taking a long-term view of changes in state, economy and society in the uplands. The forest and agrarian landscape in this region have been transformed by processes of colonialism, postcolonial development and changes in the agrarian economy of the Narmada valley. This has altered the way Adivasi forest villagers *relate* to the forests even while they continue to use it for their food, fuel wood, fodder and timber requirements.

This was starkly put forth to the researcher in a discussion related to farming and irrigation with elderly residents. There was a widespread scarcity of fertilizers in

Madhya Pradesh during the peak sowing time of winter/ Rabi season of 2014. I was sitting with a group of farmers at the market square as they waited impatiently for the public cooperative storeowner to show up and distribute fertilizer that was urgently needed for sowing. The discussion turned to the difficulties of upland agriculture, as it had recurrently during my fieldwork in the forest villages. The lack of irrigation was a key obstacle to growing wheat in the red and rocky soils and undulating terrain of the Satpura hills. Elderly farmers pointed out to me sites in the forests where the government could build a dam on the mountainous streams and provide irrigation for their fields. Dhyan Singh, one of the farmers, quipped, "*We are backward because we live in the forests. The forest department does not allow a dam to be built here*". What about submergence, I asked. "*No villages will be submerged*", all of them claimed in unison. What about the forests then, I persisted. "*Well, the forest department can cut the trees before submerging the area. For them, it simply means cutting a tree today rather than tomorrow. The forest is their property anyway; we do not get the money from it*".

The indifference towards the fate of the forests can be situated in the context of the long-term processes of environmental and rural change in the Satpura hills over 150 years. This can be summarized as commercial forestry and ecological change, agricultural transitions, and changing patterns of rural-to-urban migration. Each of this will be discussed briefly in the following subsections.

Commercial Forestry and Socio-Natures in Satpura Hills

Forests in Satpura hills are what political ecologists have referred to as 'political forests', that is, they are products of state practices, technologies of government and capitalism rather than pristine and unchanging nature.[33] The economic value of teak has shaped forestry, ecology and land use practices in this region for more than 150 years. Techniques of scientific forestry have been deployed by colonial foresters from 1870 to 1950 and by the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department since then to maximise the yield of teak from these forests. The management system of selective felling and plantations since 1877 has affected the species composition of the forests, resulting in a greater preponderance of teak at the cost of other wood species. The Reserved Forests of Harda are better understood as 'socionature': cattle protection trenches, fire lines, cement pillars and plaques organize the landscape into grids of compartments and beats. The straight rows of teak in many parts are monotonous and *unnatural* even to the untrained eye, and as the villagers complain "do not even afford the privacy to defecate in the summers". Unlike the contiguous Pachmarhi forests of Hoshangabad district that have been declared part of a Tiger Reserve, the forests of Harda are exclusively managed for timber extraction. Every teak tree in the forest over a certain height and girth is numbered, and the raison d'etre of the Working Plan is to lay out a plan for harvesting teak from different coupes in successional/ rotational cycles. The forest depots of Timarni and Khirkiya towns in Harda district are famous for teak timber for building material, and attract timber merchants and sawmill owners from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh during auctions. The Harda Working Plan claims that the government earns Rs. 20-25 Crores (USD 2.7-3.3 million) every year through the sale of teak in this forest division, although annual sales of timber and bamboo are of much higher value.

The state's imagination of the forests in Harda as a source of timber profits has shaped the geographies and cultures of forest use by Adivasi communities for over a century. The *dhya* (shifting) cultivation practices of Gond and Korku communities were delegitimized and restricted by the colonial land revenue policies in the 1860-1870 period in the Satpura hills. Forests were classified as "wastes" since they did not generate any revenue and were taken over as government forests, with Adivasi communities forced to move out of them through a combination of coercion and denial of proprietary rights. Within a span of decades, the uplands were enclosed and Adivasis were forced to abandon shifting cultivation and forest-based livelihoods. Instead, seasonal agricultural labour in the wheat fields of Harda and Hoshangabad plains began to draw large numbers of them every year.[34] Forest dwellers "failing to gain a livelihood in the older ways began to gradually drift into the margins of the ever-expanding agricultural system, now not as predators and warriors but as proletarians and dependants".[35]

The political forests of Satpura hills emerged as wooded landscapes where trees had to conform to ideas of forestry and to the needs of commercial extraction and this was a labour-intensive process. The forest villages in Harda were established by the colonial state as a response to the labour scarcity experienced by the imperial forest department.[36] These villages were planned as formal regimes of unfree labour, where officials would have the first claim on villagers' labour and control over their lives.[37] Residents of forest villages worked in the forest *primarily as forestry labourers* while cultivating marginal landholdings allotted to them through insecure tenure for subsistence. Their relation to the forest thus has been mediated through wage work even as forest-based livelihoods have been excluded as they are come into conflict with commercial forestry.

Even as part of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme begun in the 1990s, the Madhya Pradesh

Forest Department has encouraged cultivators to practice commercial agriculture within village boundaries, while regulating agro-pastoral livelihoods in the Reserved Forests.[38] Restrictions on cattle grazing led to a decline in livestock numbers, production and sale of dairy products and had adverse impacts on households dependent on livestock incomes.[39] An elderly resident of Malegaon forest village told the researcher: *"Every household had eight or ten heads of cattle – cows and buffaloes – earlier. Everything is finished now. Now we, my family, only have two cows and one buffalo"*. The forest produce harvested from the forests and sold by villagers are Amla, Tendu, Achar and Mahua. The seasonal extraction of forest produce however forms only a small part of the livelihoods basket of Harda villagers.[40] The commercial extraction of teak from these forests overshadows other human uses and imaginations of the landscape. Even though the Adivasi residents of forest villages continue to use the forest for their fodder, timber and fuelwood requirements, they think of forestland as "belonging to the government" and have a limited stake in its conservation.

Transitions in Adivasi Agriculture

"In 1974-75, someone got the first diesel engine to the village. It was a miracle for us. We had never seen water being lifted from the river before. Someone from Chicholi (a market town in the neighbouring Betul district) loaned their engine for Rs. 100 a day and taught us how to operate it".

Mangilal Dhurve, a retired Adivasi teacher, narrated to me how cultivators in his village learnt to irrigate their winter season wheat crop many years ago. Upland farmers started adopting techniques of commercial agriculture by imitating their lowland counterparts in Harda district, a process they referred to as "*dekha dekhi*" (watching and learning). For many generations, they had been labouring in the fields of farmers in the Narmada valley and had witnessed the potential of High Yielding Varieties of seeds, electricity, irrigation and fertilisers in raising the yields and income of agriculture in their fields. When the Tawa dam was built on a tributary of the Narmada River in 1975, agriculture in the valley region of Harda and Hoshangabad districts underwent a transformation. Canal irrigation in the 1980s, and greater subsidies to agriculture more recently (in the form of subsidised inputs, credit, free electricity and improved storage and marketing facilities), encouraged farmers to transition to an input-intensive and high productivity wheat and soybean annual cropping cycle.[41] Harda district today is one of the highly commercialised agrarian districts of MP, with a higher than state average of fertiliser consumption, area under irrigation and wheat and soybean yields. The per capita income of residents of the district has been increasing at a higher pace compared to rest of the state.[42] This can be seen in the increased spending in lowland villages on social functions (weddings), building houses and consumption of motorcycles, tractors, mobile phones and televisions.

Upland Adivasis have shifted away from traditional crops and started growing commercial crops because they too wish to partake in this phase of regional agrarian prosperity. Crops grown traditionally for subsistence by Adivasi cultivators in the Satpura hills included *Kodon* millet (*Paspalum scrobiculatum*), *Kutki* millet (*Panicum sumatrense*) in the winter season, and paddy and Sawan millet (*Echinochloa frumentacea*) in the monsoon season. However, almost none of the households in the study villages continue with the millets, instead preferring to grow wheat and soybean for the market. Households that have begun to sell crops in the past decade are less poor, are able to buy and consume more necessities (food, clothes, utensils, furniture, jewellery, items of personal care) and are able to build permanent brick-and-mortar dwellings. Many of them are able to send their children to study in the schools in the lowlands and even buy a motorcycle. Families that grow irrigated wheat prefer to send fewer members away for wage labour in the winter season, compared to the earlier times (before 2000s) when entire households used to migrate to the plains for wheat cultivation and harvesting. As one villager said to me, *"I only go out when I have free time on my hands. Villagers now go out less frequently. Earlier, we grew Kodon, Kutki, Sawan and paddy, and did wage labour in the plains. Now I go out only twice or thrice in a year. Work in the family farm occupies (me) twelve months (in a year)"*. Traditional millet varieties, which did not require inorganic fertilisers and pesticides, and could do with very little artificial irrigation, are now associated with poverty, backwardness and the past. Wheat farmers are considered progressive and modern, both by upland residents themselves and by local state officials. As one forest official remarked to the researcher: *"Adivasis have become much better off now. They have started consuming rotis (wheat bread) instead of their traditional millets and cornbread"*. Commercial cultivation is a part of household and community aspiration to become more "developed", and is shaped by their experience of agrarian lives in the Narmada valley.

However, there are significant risks and challenges of doing commercial farming in forested, upland areas. The terrain is undulating and the black soil suitable for growing wheat is only found in narrow strips and valleys, while the less fertile red soil is far more abundant. Although all households have access to some

cultivable land, they have marginal, fragmented holdings with uncertain legal tenure, multiple plots of land not exceeding 5 to 6 acres in total.[43] The only sources of irrigation are seasonal mountain streams and dug wells, and a majority of farms do not have steady access to electricity for drawing water. Farmers have to rely on diesel engines, and diesel purchases increase the costs of cultivation. Adivasi smallholders also find it difficult to access critical inputs like seeds, fertilizers and pesticides at the appropriate time. Shops selling these inputs are mostly located in the villages and market towns in the plains, and upland farmers often do not have the requisite networks, social or financial capital to purchase them. An old farmer told me with a sense of longing and regret that there was never enough water in his well. He continued, *"crops need inputs according to timetable. I know because I do this work in the fields of the valley farmers. I can get 12 bags of wheat from this land. But there should be sufficient urea, DAP, tonic and water. I have it in my head, I can show the world, but I do not have the saadhan (resources)"* (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Challenges of Commercial Farming in Upland Agriculture

Despite the uncertainties and difficulties associated with commercial agriculture, Adivasi farmers are preferring to adopt it because of their first-hand experience of increased yields and incomes in the Narmada valley. Other scholars have also noted the significance of agency of indigenous communities, economic aspirations and local understanding of crops and environmental change in engendering crop commercialization in the uplands.[44] As Tania Li writes about the decision of Lauje uplanders in Indonesia to plant cacao: "the desire to be less poor, live decently and send children to school was a powerful motivation for change".[45]

Migration and the significance of non-local livelihoods

On a winter afternoon in 2014, the researcher was walking with an old Adivasi farmer, Jagdish Aahke, in Malegaon, when both of them met another Adivasi man on a motorcycle going towards the plains. Jagdish narrated the livelihood of the motorcyclist:

"People living in the hills cannot depend on any one work. This man has a patch of land in the village from which he will get six to seven bags of wheat. He has also taken a paani ka theka (water contract) in Khandwa district.[46] He will get another six or seven bags (of wheat) from there". Could anyone buy a motorcycle, I asked. "No, you need at least Rs. 10,000 to 15,000 spare cash to buy one.[47] Only a person who has the resources can buy it. This man has goats and cattle in the forest. That is where he gets the extra money from. It is a very useful thing (motorcycle). He has come from Khandwa today and he will return there tonight. He can work there and look after his fields here as well".

The Adivasi from Malegaon was dividing his time between the Satpura hills and the plains and between his fields and the forest, in one season of the year. He was working as a seasonal migrant labourer, a wheat farmer and a livestock herder. Jagdish Aahke himself was too poor to own a motorcycle. He cultivated a small patch of land, irrigated with the help of a private well and a diesel engine, worked as a labourer in the plains and looked after the household and his grandchildren when his children migrated. His son laboured in the sand mining industry on the banks of Narmada River and two of his daughters had gone to the plains for weeding the *chana* (gram) crop and to work as construction labourers.

Over the last twenty years, non-local livelihoods and circular migration have become important for Adivasi households in the Satpura hills. Uplands in South and Southeast Asia have "witnessed road construction, crop intensification, capital investment, deforestation, and a movement of people and ideas on a scale unparalleled in contemporary times".[48] A similar process is underway in the Satpura hills, where access to roads built under the PMGSY[49] and MGSY[50] roads and the growing rural economy of Narmada valley has generated new economic dynamics over the last decade. Dadu, the former Forest Protection Committee President of Badwani village, had to say this about road connectivity in the uplands:

"Things have become much better since the road was built under the Pradhan Mantri scheme [PMGSY] 6-7 years ago. The bus has started to come here now. Farmers from the plains come here in their tractors in the morning; take away labourers and get them back in the evening. Labourers had to spend the night in the basti earlier. Now they come back home".

Mobility is accompanied by aspirations to emulate lowland cultures, possess consumer goods and adopt labour-saving technologies. This includes, for example, celebrating Navaratri and worshipping the goddess Durga in the autumn season, owning mobile phones and motorcycles and even the occasional television set (even though there is almost no mobile network connectivity and intermittent electricity supply). For example, there were about 30-35 motorcycles in Badwani village at the time the researcher was doing fieldwork. The growth of extra-local, non-farm employment in building construction and sand mining in the Harda plains has meant that households have more opportunities for livelihood diversification. Circular migration, an important part of upland livelihoods, has increased in frequency and become shorter in duration and synchronized with the rhythm and requirements of winter cultivation in the hills, with remittances being invested in family farms.

In every village, there are a few families whose sons are working in private sector companies or in low-level public-sector jobs like the police and paramilitary forces. For the majority of uneducated Adivasi youth, the plains offer the prospects of high-wage employment in sand mining or construction businesses, or industrial jobs in distant cities like Indore and Bangalore. They are willing to take up these opportunities even though these may be insecure, temporary and hazardous in nature. This is in line with evidence from the national sample survey data that suggests that Scheduled Tribes in India have the highest rate of temporary and seasonal migration among all social groups.[51] Empirical studies show that such seasonal and circular migration is increasing in Madhya Pradesh, and may even have the possibility of becoming more accumulative for the rural poor.[52] This proliferation of non-local livelihoods has reduced the interest of Adivasi residents in forest villages in going to the forest and relying solely on forest-based livelihoods.

Conclusion: Ethno-Environmental Fixes and Consequences of Eco-Incarceration

The empirical evidence in this paper demonstrates key changes that are taking place in the society and economy of Satpura hills, a region which is part of the Central Indian Tribal Belt. It has been argued that the Gond and Korku Adivasis who reside in the hills have known the teak forests primarily as a site of timber extraction and as government property, and their predominant engagement with the forest has been as *wage labourers*. In the last two decades, they have imitated farmers in the lowlands and tried to adopt practices of commercial agriculture, with its attendant risks and uncertainties. In the process, they have moved away from subsistence crops, traditional millets and forest-based livelihoods. Non-local farm and non-farm opportunities have become an important part of household livelihood portfolio and Adivasi youth and migrant workers spend many months in the year away from their villages and forest. Adivasi life has become more embedded in national and regional capitalist circuits of exchange, production and consumption. This has generated new kinds of risks, uncertainties and precariousness; and what geographer Jonathan Rigg has referred to as "new poverty"[53] but this has also become a site for new aspirations for consumption, upward mobility and agrarian futures.

The aspirations and everyday struggles of upland Adivasis in Harda are at odds with the eco-incarcerated imaginaries of indigenous communities and therefore present a dilemma for the state, for scholars of indigeneity, and for indigenous rights activists. For more than a hundred years, the colonial and postcolonial state classified Adivasis as forestry labourers and residents of forest villages. The conditions of tenure insecurity, forced labour and "everyday tyrannies" by forest officials marked the lives of forest villagers who were part of state-capitalist networks of timber extraction.[54] As residents of forest villages, their landholdings are not private property and they find it difficult to access formal credit, agricultural equipment, electricity, and irrigation and farm subsidies on par with their lowland counterparts. Their future and well-being in the 21st century is imagined to be tied with the forest, and the liberal reform agenda includes a promise of individual and community forest rights as part of the Forest Rights Act 2006. It is imagined that Adivasi communities will actively participate in and benefit from the management and governance of forests and biodiversity with the implementation of decentralization and tenure reform in letter and spirit. Governance approaches that "synergise protection of vulnerable populations and highly-valued natures from the destructive effects of markets" have been critiqued as ethno-environmental "fixes" within contemporary capitalism.[55] The guarantee of land and forest rights, although an essential component of well-being for Adivasi communities, is far from sufficient when it comes to questions of poverty and sustainability. This is especially true considering the multi-locational and diversified Adivasi livelihoods that straddle farm, forest and cities and are connected to regional and national economies of exchange and accumulation.

Eco-incarceration can also have effects of physical dispossession for Adivasis living in conservation landscapes. Along with timber extraction in the Harda Forest Division, the Satpura hills (as well as many other forests in CITB) are framed as a key landscape for tiger conservation. The forest villages of Harda lie

in the Pench-Satpura-Melghat tiger habitat corridor and their livelihood activities are therefore viewed as anthropogenic threats to wildlife.[56] Conservationists often view Adivasi communities as primarily drawing their livelihoods from forests and hold them responsible for forest degradation. This implies that securing a forest landscape for conservation is often carried out by removing villages and human habitations to create pristine national parks and tiger reserves.[57] It should be noted that several villages located inside the Satpura Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh have already been relocated and a similar fate awaits other forest villages in and around the tiger reserve.[58]

Eco-incarceration obfuscates granular changes occurring in the economy, ecology and society of the Central Indian Tribal Belt. Historians have argued that the CITB region has not been remote or isolated even in the pre-colonial period; there were sovereign polities and forest communities who participated in relations of exchange, production, raids and warfare with neighbouring agrarian communities.[59] Colonial rule embedded the region within wider networks of capitalist production, labour migration and agrarian accumulation.[60] Similarly, the indigenous residents of CITB today are participating in global networks of production, exchange and labour, albeit on terms that are extremely unequal and produce "conjugated oppression" within communities.[61] Yet, they are viewed through the prism of eco-incarceration and therefore developmental policies for tribal welfare are designed in conjunction with environmental and conservation policies. The political imagination and governance interventions for indigenous communities in 21st century continue to be constrained by ethno-environmental fixes, and therefore are unable to address the political economy of Adivasi livelihoods in the CITB. The challenge for scholars and activists then is to extricate the conversation from an eco-incarcerated discourse and respond to these new realities and the questions they pose for social justice and indigenous rights.

Acknowledgements

The residents of Borpani, Keljhiri, Badwani and Malegon forest village in Harda district, Madhya Pradesh, gave their valuable time for this research and the author is deeply grateful for their support and patience. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Asian Studies Summer Institute at Penn State University, USA in April 2017. The author wishes to acknowledge the comments and inputs received on draft versions by Professor Asmita Kabra (Ambedkar University Delhi) and Professor Charlotte Eubanks (Penn State University).

Notes

1. The Glasgow Climate Pact, accessed on 6th December 2021 from https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/COP26-Presidency-Outcomes-The-Climate-Pact.pdf
2. Tribal Pride Day, a celebration of tribal freedom fighters on the birth anniversary of the Adivasi political leader Birsa Munda.
3. Prime Minister's Forest Wealth Scheme, which is executed by the Tribal Co-Operative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited (TRIFED), under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India.
4. Shah, Alpa. (2010). *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, environmentalism, and insurgency in Jharkhand, India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
5. Trouillot, M. R. (2003). "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness", in M. R. Trouillot, *Global Transformations* (pp. 7-28). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
6. Niezen, Ronald. (2003). *The Origins of indigenism: Human rights and the politics of identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
7. Baviskar, A. (2006). "The Politics of Being 'Indigenous'", in B. G. Karlsson and T. B. Subba (edited), *Indigeneity in India*, 1st ed., 33-50. London: Kegan Paul Limited.
8. Benjamin, Geoffrey. (2016). "Indigenous Peoples: Indigeneity, Indigeny or Indigenism?", in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Law*, 1st ed. Routledge, and Hodgson, Dorothy L. (2002). "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives on the Indigenous Rights Movement in Africa and the Americas", *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4, pp. 1037-49.
9. India has not ratified ILO's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.
10. (Descendants of the) Original Inhabitant in the Hindi language.
11. Karlsson and Subba. "Introduction", *Indigeneity in India*, pp. 1-18, and Karlsson, Bengt G. (2003). "Anthropology and the 'Indigenous Slot': Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India", *Critique of Anthropology*, 23, no. 4, pp. 403-23.
12. Karlsson and Subba. "Introduction", *Indigeneity in India*, pp. 1-18, and Rycroft, Daniel and Sangeeta Dasgupta. (2011). "Indigenous Pasts and the Politics of Belonging", in *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, London ; New York, pp. 1-14.
13. Bhengra, Ratnaker, C. R. Bijoy and Shimreichon Luithui. (1999). *The Adivasis of India*. Report / Minority Rights Group International, 98, 1. London: Minority Rights Group.
14. Nadasdy, P. (2005). "Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Noble Indian: Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalism". *Ethnohistory* 52, no. 2, pp. 291-331, and Pepper, David. (1996). *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. London ; New York: Routledge.
15. Skaria, Ajay. (1997). "Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3, pp. 726-745.
16. Guha, Ramachandra. (2000). *Environmentalism: A Global History*. New York: Longman.

17. Gadgil, Madhav, Fikret Berkes and Carl Folke. (1993). "Indigenous Knowledge for Biodiversity Conservation", *Ambio* 22, no. 2/3, pp. 151-56.
18. Brosius, J. Peter. (1997). "Endangered Forest, Endangered People: Environmentalist Representations of Indigenous Knowledge", *Human Ecology*, 25, no. 1, pp. 47-69.
19. Brosius, J. Peter. (2004). "Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas at the World Parks Congress". *Conservation Biology*, 18, no. 3, pp. 609-12.
20. Dove, Michael R. (2006). "Indigenous People and Environmental Politics", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, no. 1, pp. 191-208.
21. Nadasdy. "Transcending the Debate", pp. 291-331.
22. Raymond, Hames. (2007). "The Ecologically Noble Savage Debate", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36, no. 1, pp. 177-90.
23. Conklin, Beth A. and Laura R. Graham. (2009). "The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics", *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 4, pp. 695-710.
24. Kapila, Kriti. (2008). "The Measure of a Tribe: The Cultural Politics of Constitutional Reclassification in North India", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1, pp. 117-34.
25. Damodaran, Vinita. (2006). "The Politics of Marginality and the Construction of Indigeneity in Chotanagpur", *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 2, pp. 179-96.
26. Baviskar, Amita. (1997). "Tribal Politics and Discourses of Environmentalism", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 31, no. 2, pp. 195-223.
27. Li, Tania Murray. (2000). "Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 1, pp. 149-79.
28. Hodgson, Dorothy Louise. (2011). *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: Postcolonial Politics in a Neoliberal World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
29. Li, Tanya Murray. (2001). "Masyarakat Adat, Difference, and the Limits of Recognition in Indonesia's Forest Zone", *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 03, pp. 645-676.
30. Government of India. (2014). Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India, New Delhi: Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
31. Bakshi, Sanchita, Arunish Chawla, and Mihir Shah. (2015). "Regional Disparities in India: A Moving Frontier", *Economic and Political Weekly* L, no. 1, pp. 44-53.
32. Das, Budhaditya. (2017). "State, Adivasis and Upland Livelihoods: A Study of Forest Villages in Central India", PhD Thesis, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi.
33. Peluso, Nancy Lee, and Peter Vandergeest. (2001). "Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3, pp. 761-812.
34. Bates, Crispin N. (1985). "Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India: The Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour", *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 3, pp. 573-92.
35. Guha, Sumit. (2006). *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
36. Das. "State, Adivasis and Upland Livelihoods.
37. Prasad, Archana. (1994). "Forests and Subsistence in Colonial India: A Study of the Central Provinces, 1830-1945", PhD Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
38. Das. "State, Adivasis and Upland Livelihoods".
39. Vira, Bhaskar. (2005). "Deconstructing the Harda Experience: Limits of Bureaucratic Participation". *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 48, pp. 5068-75.
40. Boaz, Arvind. (2004). "Case Study of Tendu Leaves (Diospyros Melanoxylon) in Harda District, Madhya Pradesh, India", in *Forest Products, Livelihoods and Conservation: Case Studies of Non-Timber Forest Product Systems*, Bogor Barat, Indonesia: Centre for International Forestry Research, I: pp. 295-312.
41. Krishnamurthy, Mekhala. (2012). "States of Wheat: The Changing Dynamics of Public Procurement in Madhya Pradesh", *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 52, pp. 72-83.
42. Das. "State, Adivasis and Upland Livelihoods".
43. In contrast, about 43.5% of the lowland farmers in Harda have medium and large land holdings (greater than 10 acres) and cultivate 79.7% of the total cropped land in the district.
44. Finnis, Elizabeth. (2007). "The Political Ecology of Dietary Transitions: Changing Production and Consumption Patterns in the Kolli Hills, India", *Agriculture and Human Values* 24, no. 3, pp. 343-53.
45. Li, Tania Murray. (2015). "Can There Be Food Sovereignty Here?", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 1, pp. 205-11.
46. *Paani ka theka* or a water contract refers to the practice of lowland farmers entering into seasonal contracts with upland labourers to irrigate their wheat crops. The labourers stay in their fields for the entire duration of the crop, usually in exchange for wages paid in bags of wheat.
47. Motorcycles cost between Rs. 40,000-50,000 in Madhya Pradesh. Consumers can buy them on credit by paying a part of the money upfront.
48. Li, Tania Murray. (2005). *Transforming the Indonesian Uplands: Marginality, Power and Production*. London: Taylor & Francis e-Library.
49. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (Prime Minister's Scheme for Rural Roads).
50. Mukhyamantri Gram Sadak Yojana (Chief Minister's Scheme for Rural Roads).
51. Keshri, Kunal, and R. B. Bhagat. (2012). "Temporary and Seasonal Migration: Regional Pattern, Characteristics and Associated Factors", *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII, no. 4, pp. 81-88.
52. Deshingkar, Priya, Pramod Sharma, Sushil Kumar, Shaheen Akter, and John Farrington. (2008). "Circular Migration in Madhya Pradesh: Changing Patterns and Social Protection Needs", *The European Journal of Development Research* 20, no. 4, pp. 612-28.
53. Rigg, Jonathan. (2006). "Land, Farming, Livelihoods, and Poverty: Rethinking the Links in the Rural South", *World Development* 34, no. 1, pp. 180-202.
54. Das. "State, Adivasis and Upland Livelihoods".
55. Anthias, Penelope, and Sarah A. Radcliffe. (2015). "The Ethno-Environmental Fix and Its Limits: Indigenous

Land Titling and the Production of Not-Quite-Neoliberal Natures in Bolivia", *Geoforum* 64, pp. 257–69.

56. Qureshi, Qamar, S. Saini, P. Basu, Rajesh Gopal, R. Raza, and Yadavendra Jhala. (2014). "Connecting Tiger Populations for Long-Term Conservation". Dehradun: National Tiger Conservation Authority and Wildlife Institute of India.
57. Kabra, Asmita, and Budhaditya Das. (2022). "Aye for the Tiger: Hegemony, Authority and Volition in India's Regime of Dispossession for Conservation", *Oxford Development Studies*.
58. There were 4110 families living inside the Satpuda Tiger Reserve in 2005, of whom 2772 families were relocated between 2005 and 2019.
59. Guha, Sumit. (2006). *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Prasad, Archana. (1999). "Military Conflict and Forests in Central Provinces, India: Gonds and the Gondwana Region in Pre-Colonial History", *Environment and History* 5, no. 3, pp. 361-75.
60. Prasad. "Forests and Subsistence in Colonial India, and Bates, Crispin N. (1985). "Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India", pp. 573-92.
61. Lerche, Jens, and Alpa Shah. (2018). "Conjugated Oppression within Contemporary Capitalism: Class, Caste, Tribe and Agrarian Change in India", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 5–6, pp. 927–49.