


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can migrants be indigenous? Affirmative action, space, and belonging in the Andaman Islands

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Abstract

In India, the contested category of Scheduled Tribes (STs) is enacted in order to socially uplift certain indigenous communities. This article concentrates on analysing the intersection between modes of indigenous self-definition, political assertion, and localized conceptualizations of space and belonging. My ethnographic example from the Andaman Islands focuses on the Ranchis, aboriginal labour migrants from the Chotanagpur plateau in central India. Being classified as STs, both in their homelands and other localities to which they migrated, Ranchi activists seek to accomplish coeval recognition in the Andamans. Their demands to be rewarded for the labourers' contribution to the islands' development are complicated by their occupation of non-ancestral lands that were originally inhabited by indigenous hunter-gatherer communities. By narrowing the notion of indigeneity, and hence ST status, down to communities who live on ancestral lands and who are culturally, socially, and economically different to migrant communities, state authorities and activists reject the Ranchis' demands for affirmative action as Adivasis *from* but not *of* the Andamans. Reflecting on the existential relationship between land and people in popular understandings of indigeneness, this article aims to investigate the Ranchis' claims of being migrants, yet also indigenous, in order to explore alternative possibilities to think through the notion of indigeneity. In so doing, I focus on the Ranchis' subaltern history of racialized labour migration, their lack of voice within the post-colonial welfare regime, and their striving for autonomy and autarky by applying principles of indigenous knowledge and cosmologies from their homelands to the Andamans.

Keywords: Indigeneity; migration; Andaman Islands; Chotanagpuri Adivasis; human-environment relations

Introduction

In the global public sphere, interpretations of the flexible, relational, contextual, and politically loaded notion of indigeneity vary widely: while the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues states that no formal definition would be necessary, the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggests understanding indigeneity as a 'political identity'.¹ Academic perspectives diverge, too, and, at times, contradict each other. Some scholars view the term as having no analytic value, because it refers to a 'family of resemblances' instead of determining who is indigenous and who is not.² However, as individuals, communities, and states around the world relate to indigeneity in myriad of ways, scholars keep on analysing the dynamics of appropriating this efficacious category of identity in order to express and operationalize collective difference in local contexts.³ Many common citizens, for example, continue to employ primitivist essentializations or racist prejudices, stemming from the era of colonialism, in order to mark the *indigene* (native, from Latin *indu*: in or within, and *gignere*: to beget) as 'uncivilized' or 'savage', and to place them in a lower position on the evolutionary ladder. Others, in turn, take up similar stereotypes in order to create a 'positive' image, often by exoticizing and eroticizing them as *the* 'other' to capitalist modernity and environmental crisis. Both indigenous and non-indigenous activists mobilize the label of indigeneness in order to claim sovereignty over traditional territories, as well as recognition, protection, rights, and welfare from the state.⁴ Indigeneity does, therefore, function as a dialectic between ascriptions of identity and appropriations, reinterpretations, rearrangements, and camouflages of the very classifications that mark them as different from the majorities of the states in which they live.⁵

Many of the approximately 400 million Indigenous Peoples⁶ across the world endorse indigeneness to address historical injustices and work towards decolonization.⁷ The global spread of indigeneity as a category of

¹ A. Kuper, 'Preface', in *Indigeneity on the move: varying manifestations of a contested concept*, (eds) N. Uddin, E. Gerharz and P. Chakkarath (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2018), pp. ix–x.

² Richard Wolf and Frank Heidemann, 'Indigeneity, performance, and the state in South Asia and beyond', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 73, no. 1–2, 2014, p. 3.

³ Adam Kuper, 'The return of the native', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, pp. 389–402. Michèle D. Dominy, 'White settler assertions of native status', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1995, pp. 358–74. Francesca Merlan, 'Indigeneity: global and local', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2009, pp. 303–33.

⁴ Alpa Shah, 'The dark side of indigeneity? Indigenous people, rights, and development in India', *History Compass*, vol. 5, 2007, pp. 1806–32. Sita Venkateswar and Emma Hughes (eds), *The politics of indigeneity: dialogues and reflections on indigenous activism* (London: Zed, 2011). Wolf and Heidemann, 'Indigeneity, performance, and the state in South Asia and beyond', pp. 2–4, 9.

⁵ P. Zehmisch, 'Fluid indigenities in the Indian Ocean: a small history of the state and its other', in *Indigeneity on the move*, (eds) Uddin, Gerharz and Chakkarath, p. 287.

⁶ Kuper, 'Preface', p. x.

⁷ L. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, 'The politics of indigeneity, anarchist praxis, and decolonization', *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, 2021, pp. 7–42.

identity may be regarded as closely intertwined with the rise of environmentalist consciousness from the 1980s onwards.⁸ Responding to the growing effects of environmental destruction in the Anthropocene—through mining, deforestation, pollution, and so on—Indigenous Peoples have come to be represented as ecological guardians who supposedly live in ‘harmony’ with ‘nature’.⁹ If one extends this reading into a broader, anthropologically informed definition, indigeneity may be understood as the social, cultural, ecological, and ontological ethics of a collective occupying a marginal position in a nation-state; these ethics become manifest in the form of intrinsic and dynamic relations to an environment, landscape, or cosmology.

A common denominator of indigenous experience across the globe is the defence of ancestral, often emotionally loaded, traditional lands or commons against the alienation, extraction, and destruction of its resources, and, commonly, against external, colonizing state forces seeking to displace them. Hence, the paradigmatic political statement of ‘firstness’, or ‘having been there first’,¹⁰ is routinely translated into primordial claims to resources and sovereignty over ‘indigenous’ lands; as the claim goes, these lands have belonged to their community since times immemorial—or, at least, earlier than to other communities. Consequently, Indigenous Peoples’ existential embeddedness, ‘rootedness’, or attachment to their ancestral homelands seems to be a critical factor in determining their indigeneness at the global, national, and local level.¹¹ A recognition as an indigenous community of a certain geographical region, depicted on a map with clear boundaries, or of a designated protected area, landscape, or reserve, renders Indigenous Peoples legible to a bureaucratic regime, which, in turn, regulates their access to state protection and welfare.

This article takes up the idea that Indigenous Peoples exert a close relationship to the land they inhabit and through which they perceive their own history, memory, and genealogies to unfold.¹² From a theoretical perspective, this intervention seeks to critically investigate the widely unquestioned assumption that indigenous bonds to their land are ‘primordial’ and existential, and that these bonds may be exclusively enacted in relation to ancestral, traditional territories. The anthropological/geographical overlap between human (*anthropos*) and earth (*geo*) may be scrutinized when assessing the constructed ‘nature’ of this relationship as part of a politics of identity, for example, in

⁸ Zehmisch, ‘Fluid indigenities in the Indian Ocean’, p. 280.

⁹ Raymond Hames, ‘The ecologically noble savage debate’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 36, 2007, pp. 177–90. E. de Maaker and M. Schleiter: ‘Introduction: screening indigeneity and nation’, in *Media, indigeneity and nation in South Asia*, (eds) M. Schleiter and E. de Maaker (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 6.

¹⁰ de Maaker and Schleiter, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

¹¹ Kaushik Ghosh, ‘Between global flows and local dams: indigeneness, locality, and the transnational sphere in Jharkhand, India’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2006, pp. 510–11, 518. N. Uddin, E. Gerharz and P. Chakkarath, ‘Exploring indigeneity: introductory remarks on a contested concept’, in *Indigeneity on the move*, (eds) Uddin, Gerharz and Chakkarath, pp. 3, 11.

¹² T. Ingold, *The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 139.

indigenous media representations;¹³ here, indigenous and non-indigenous activists alike ‘strategically essentialize’¹⁴ ancestral lands as primordial, enduring, and eternal.¹⁵ In the Anthropocene, indigenous lands are endorsed with agency beyond being just a backdrop to or a geographical given of human activity; hence, claims of entitlement and affirmative action, too, frequently refer to the epistemic coordinates ‘indigenous lands/Indigenous Peoples’.

In the following, I am going to critically investigate the supposed inseparability of Indigenous Peoples from their traditional lands from a theoretical and a historically informed, ethnographic perspective by exploring a set of related questions.

Could one apply the label of indigeneity to the members of a community who have developed a characteristically ‘indigenous’ relationship—one that Tim Ingold defined by considering notions of ancestry, generation, substance, memory, and land¹⁶—to a certain territory and environment that does not form part of their ancestral lands, myths, legends, ontologies, or cosmologies? In other words, could the constructed nomenclature ‘indigenous’ be applied to migrants inhabiting a newly settled territory? Further, what kind of groundbreaking political consequences would such an acknowledgement entail, especially with regard to forms of affirmative action that Indigenous Peoples are claiming and availing themselves across the globe?

Addressing these questions, I propose to closely investigate the adaptation processes of indigenous migrants to the landscapes and environments they moved to. These relations may be understood by considering their historical context, such as settler-colonialism or indentured labour migrations,¹⁷ and the far-reaching implications that movements across space and time have on both individuals and communities.¹⁸ Beyond exploring human-environment

¹³ de Maaker and Schleiter, ‘Introduction’, pp. 14–19.

¹⁴ G. C. Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies: deconstructing historiography’, in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, (eds) R. Guha and G. C. Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 15.

¹⁵ Nava Kishor Das, ‘Indigeneity, anthropology, and the Indian tribes: a critique’, *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, February 2015, pp. 15, 31. Alpa Shah criticizes the fact that indigenous rights activists in Jharkhand tend to further marginalize rural tribal communities by deliberately ignoring their seasonal labour migration patterns, which do not correspond to ‘their vision of creating sustainable communities, close to nature and their land, in tribal areas’. Shah, ‘The dark side of indigeneity?’, p. 1824.

¹⁶ Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, pp. 132–55.

¹⁷ K. Ghosh, ‘A market for aboriginality: primitivism and race classification in the indentured labour market of colonial India’, in *Subaltern Studies X: writings on South Asian history and society*, (eds) G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and S. Tharu (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 8–48. M. Mann, ‘Migration—re-migration—circulation: South Asian Kulis in the Indian Ocean and beyond, 1840–1940’, in *Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, (eds) D. Gabaccia and D. Hoerder (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 108–33. P. Wolfe, *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology: the politics and poetics of an ethnographic event* (London: Cassel, 1999). P. Wolfe, *Traces of history: elementary structures of race* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).

¹⁸ P. Zehmisch and F. Heidemann, ‘Introduction’, in *Manifestations of history: time, space and community in the Andaman Islands*, (eds) F. Heidemann and P. Zehmisch (Delhi: Primus, 2016), pp. 1–17.

relations among indigenous migrants, this article also aims to unpack how such relations are appropriated in the field of material and symbolic politics.

To elaborate on my theoretical framework, I am going to concentrate on the regional example of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, where I conducted around two years of fieldwork between 2006 and 2016. Parts of my research on subaltern migrations, settlement, and place-making policies caused me to understand the islands as a site of encounter between the multi-ethnic population and the administration of this settler-colony and several kinds of indigenous communities.¹⁹ Anthropologists are usually familiar with the indigenous hunter-gatherers through A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalist classic *The Andaman Islanders*.²⁰ The Andamanese were severely affected by frontier and settler-colonial dynamics after the British installed an aggressively expanding penal colony in Port Blair on South Andaman in 1858.²¹ After partition and Independence, the islands were colonized with settlers and migrants from all parts of the subcontinent and came to constitute the Indian Union Territory Andaman and Nicobar Islands.²² Called 'Mini-India', contemporary Andaman society encompasses a diverse and pluralist population of 400,000 to 500,000 that represents numerous castes, religions, and linguistic and ethnic groups from all over South Asia and Southeast Asia.²³ Due to a differing history of settlement and land occupation than other settler-colonies such as Australia or the Americas,²⁴ one must analyse the question of indigeneity in the Andamans within a very particular regional and historical context. One can, nonetheless, identify parallels that broadly resemble characteristic settler-colonial processes: like elsewhere, the indigenous islanders were subjected to arbitrariness, discrimination, and racism, accompanied by genocidal and

¹⁹ The Andamans and the more southern lying group of the Nicobars are located in the Bay of Bengal, in geographical vicinity to Southeast Asia. Lying at a distance of more than 1,000 kilometres from the Indian subcontinent, both groups comprise altogether 572 islands, reefs, and rocks. Pankaj Sekhsaria, 'When chanos chanos became Tsunami macchi: the post-December 2004 scenario in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands', *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, no. 106, Sep.-Dec. 2009, p. 256.

²⁰ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1922). In this article, I will be using the terms 'Andaman Islanders' and 'Andamanese' interchangeably to refer to all indigenous hunter-gatherer groups of the Andamans.

²¹ The colonial administration classified the Andaman Islanders into four tribes, and estimated their precolonial population at 6,500 in 1780: the Great Andamanese with nine tribal subdivisions, distinguished by their dialects, numbered approximately 5,000 persons; the Jarawa around 600 persons; the Onge between 700 and 1,000 persons; and the Sentinelese between 50 and 100 persons. V. Pandya, *In the forest: visual and material worlds of Andamanese history (1858-2006)* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: University Press of America, 2009), p. 74. Among numerous monographs on the Andamanese, I recommend: S. Sen, *Savagery and colonialism in the Indian Ocean: power, pleasure and the Andaman Islanders* (Routledge: New York, 2010); S. Venkateswar, *Development and ethnocide: colonial practices in the Andaman Islands* (Copenhagen: Iwgia, 2004).

²² P. Zehmisch, *Mini-India: the politics of migration and subalternity in the Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 51, 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁴ André Béteille, 'The idea of Indigenous People', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1998, p. 188.

ethnocidal tendencies, implying the erasure of native sovereignty and the elimination of 'weaker' races.²⁵

While settler-colonialism and relations to the Andamanese provide the wider context of this article, I am going to narrow the focus on the central and recurring question of spatiality in the formulation, deployment, and articulation of indigenous belonging among migrated Adivasis²⁶ from the Chotanagpur plateau²⁷ in central India, the so-called 'Ranchis'. From 1918 onwards, these subaltern labour migrants were recruited by contractors working for the Catholic Labour Bureau in the town of Ranchi. Indicating their place of recruitment, these labourers and their descendants have been called 'Ranchis' or 'Ranchiwallahs'. Both colonial and post-colonial authorities employed Ranchi labourers in order to clear forests for the timber industry and to erect infrastructures for a rapidly growing migrant and settler society on spaces that originally belong to the Andamanese.²⁸

The ethnographic example of these 'indigenous' migrants from Chotanagpur serves to critically discuss the interplay between conceptualizations of spatiality, belonging, and the politics of indigeneity in several steps. In the first section, I am going to summarize and discuss categories of indigeness, such as savage, tribal, and aboriginal, which may be understood as genealogical predecessors of the politically loaded notion of indigeneity, as well as the India-specific terms Adivasi, Vanvasi, and Scheduled Tribe (ST).²⁹ The second section provides an overview of the intertwined histories of the indigenous islanders and the Ranchis by focusing on processes of forest clearance, and the effects of racial stereotyping on processes of indigenous subalternization. In a third section, I will critically analyse the politically controversial question of recognizing the Ranchis as STs in the islands. The paradigmatic inseparability of indigenous lands and peoples is identified as the major reason for state welfare machinery to reject the Ranchis' ST claim. The fourth section is going to critically investigate the limited ability of the Ranchi community to formulate political claims of local belonging due to internal fragmentations and divisions. The final section thinks with and through the almost dogmatic link between land and people in definitions or in the common understanding of indigeness. It calls for an intellectual broadening of the paradigm by paying close attention to the gradual unfolding of intrinsic economic, ecological, genealogical, and spiritual connections between indigenous migrants and their diasporic homelands.

²⁵ Wolfe, *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology*. Wolfe, *Traces of history*.

²⁶ Composed of the words *adi* (beginning) and *vasi* (dweller), the term 'Adivasi' functions as an equivalent of 'aboriginal'. M. Carrin, 'Jharkhand: alternative citizenship in an "Adivasi state"', in *The modern anthropology of India: ethnography, themes and theory*, (eds) P. Berger and F. Heidemann (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 107.

²⁷ The Chotanagpur plateau extends across parts of the present states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal.

²⁸ P. Zehmisch, 'The invisible architects of Andaman: manifestations of aboriginal migration from Ranchi', in *Manifestations of history*, (eds) Heidemann and Zehmisch, pp. 122–138.

²⁹ Zehmisch, 'Fluid indigenities in the Indian Ocean', p. 270.

Genealogies of indigeneity

The global circulation of the discourse of indigeneity and its entrance into national and international politics implies particular consequences. First, indigeneity presupposes a collective consciousness of the workings of politics among those who claim to be indigenous. It involves a strategic application of the principle of indigenous self-definition in order to be recognized and, thus, enclosed into the hegemonic framework of globalized indigeneity.³⁰ As a result, indigenous leaders and spokespersons articulate political claims for legal rights and collective recognition in dominant Western frameworks.³¹ Kuper's ground-breaking and widely contested critique of the 'return of the native' as 'indigenous'—accordingly, a reinvention of the nineteenth-century notion of the 'primitive'—highlights ethical disputes over who and why someone may or may not be recognized as indigenous.³² The term 'Indigenous Peoples' is equally contested because it represents communities affected by differing regional and national contexts, in which 'travelling models' of indigenous voice assume ambiguous and often contradictory meanings.³³

Second, the idea of indigeneity is frequently understood as essentially pre-modern,³⁴ it is thus posed as a counter-discourse to modernity by non-indigenous actors who romanticize indigenous peoples as 'different', 'exotic', and 'close to nature'. Such 'otherings' have influenced the political language of indigeneity as it is used by vocal indigenous and non-indigenous actors, who instrumentalize the discourse of indigeneity in order to voice their particular interests.³⁵ For example, they appropriate the image of Native Americans as 'natural' conservationists in order to bring forward arguments about property rights, sovereignty, cultural pride, and ethical superiority.³⁶

Terms relating to indigeneity in the here-and-now have specific genealogies on the Indian subcontinent.³⁷ Since the early days of colonialism, communities living outside the spectre of caste society were surveyed, classified, ordered, dominated, and ruled by marking them as 'primitive' or 'savage'.³⁸ During different periods, a variety of modern neologisms have come to assume particular historical trajectories.³⁹ The term 'tribe' gained major traction when the British transferred the concept from their African colonies to the

³⁰ Merlan, 'Indigeneity', pp. 303–33.

³¹ Kuper, 'The return of the native', pp. 389–402.

³² Ibid.

³³ A. Tsing, 'Indigenous voice', in *Indigenous experience today*, (eds) M. de la Cadena and O. Starn (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), p. 38.

³⁴ E. Halbmayer, 'Indigenous Peoples and the transformations of modernity', in *Indigenous modernities in South America*, (ed.) E. Halbmayer (Canyon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2018), p. 1.

³⁵ Shah, 'The dark side of indigeneity?', pp. 1806–32.

³⁶ Hames, 'The ecologically noble savage debate', pp. 177–90.

³⁷ Ghosh, 'Between global flows and local dams', p. 528, note 1.

³⁸ Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah (eds), *Savage attack: tribal insurgency in India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2014), pp. 1–3. N. Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 173–75.

³⁹ Prathama Banerjee, 'Writing the Adivasi: some historiographical notes', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 131–53. Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Introduction: reading

administrative language of the Raj;⁴⁰ here, 'tribe' was sharply distinguished from 'caste' and viewed as lower in the hierarchy.⁴¹ The administrative category of the tribe—which came to be enmeshed in the Criminal Tribes Act, declared in 1871—was eventually applied to classify and fix the previously more fluid identifications of a large variety of often mobile non-caste groups, among them hunting and gathering, herding, fishing, and farming communities.⁴² All those who did not fit the British vision of creating a legible, taxable, and governable colonial subject, and who were regarded as marginal to mainstream society and state structures, should ideally be embedded in a sedentary, ordered, and disciplined society consisting of legible communities that fulfil certain roles in a local division of labour.⁴³

The discourses of savagery and aboriginality, ascribed in different capacities to native subjects, especially to tribal populations, played a primary role in establishing colonial rule and its labour market economy.⁴⁴ The first—savagery—served as a counterpoint to the self-imagination of the colonial state as harbinger of 'civilization' and 'modernity'. In the Raj, ideas of savagery were, among others, linked to the notion of an 'inhospitable forest environment'.⁴⁵ The British were aiming to transform such 'savage' environments—'jungles' that were perceived as 'wastelands', 'wilderness', or 'unproductive', especially as they were inhabited by Indigenous Peoples⁴⁶—into supposedly productive, civilized, and morally ordered zones of agricultural and industrial production. The notion of aboriginality, in turn, is a colonial-modern paradigm that evolved out of the settler-colonial experience of the Americas and Antipodes, where white colonizers annihilated and dispossessed peoples marked as racially different.⁴⁷ In South Asia, the discourse of aboriginality came to be closely intertwined with capitalist developments in the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Aboriginality provided the ideological groundwork for the commercial transportation of aboriginal 'coolies', like the Ranchis, as indentured labour to overseas destinations,⁴⁹ as well as across the subcontinent (for example, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, and Andamans) to erect plantations and

the archive, reframing "Adivasi" histories', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–8.

⁴⁰ P. Berger and F. Heidemann, 'Introduction: the many Indias. The whole and its parts', in *The modern anthropology of India*, (eds) Berger and Heidemann, p. 6.

⁴¹ Dasgupta, 'Introduction', p. 2. Wolf and Heidemann, 'Indigeneity, performance, and the state in South Asia and beyond', pp. 6–7. Bates and Shah (eds), *Savage attack*, pp. 2–3.

⁴² Dirks, *Castes of mind*, pp. 173–175. S. Sen, *Disciplining punishment: colonialism and convict society in the Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 42–46.

⁴³ de Maaker and Schleiter, 'Introduction', p. 3. Sen, *Disciplining punishment*, pp. 42–46.

⁴⁴ Ghosh, 'A market for aboriginality', pp. 8–48.

⁴⁵ Vinita Damodaran, 'Indigenous agency: customary rights and tribal protection in Eastern India 1830–1930', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 76, 2013, p. 94.

⁴⁶ Banerjee, 'Writing the Adivasi', p. 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Ghosh, 'A market for aboriginality', pp. 8–48.

⁴⁹ The system of indenture came to be erected on the foundations of the system of slavery after its abolition. H. Tinker, *A new system of slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

colonial infrastructures.⁵⁰ The authorities consciously and systematically recruited aboriginal migrant labourers who they envisioned as suitable—because they were regarded as both ‘able-bodied’ and ‘docile’, qualities which accompanied the Ranchis’ migration to the Andamans, too⁵¹—to work in forest clearance and infrastructure projects.⁵²

After Independence, the post-colonial Indian state faced the task of including formerly excluded ‘savages’ into the nation.⁵³ This shift from colonial savagery to post-colonial aboriginality was tackled by propagating the idea of national unity, in which tribals are allocated a positionality as ‘primordial Indians’.⁵⁴ Subsequently, pastoral state policies were introduced to uplift STs through affirmative action. While the state does not admit a categorization of its tribal groups as indigenous by bringing forward the argument that all Indians are indigenous,⁵⁵ and that it would be difficult to assess who came first,⁵⁶ the Supreme Court of India validated the indigeneity of all Indian tribes in 2011.⁵⁷

Affirmative action in India has been accompanied by the politics of indigenous (self-) empowerment, centring on self-definitions as Adivasi. Aiming to forge a new sense of identity among different tribal communities in order to resist the colonial rule of *dikus* (foreigners), politicized notions of Adivasi identity had already emerged in Jharkhand in the 1930s, among others, due to the institutional impetus of various Christian churches.⁵⁸ In recent decades, Adivasiness came to be influenced by globally circulating notions of indigenous belonging and voice.⁵⁹ Currently, many of the approximately 104 million Adivasis in India⁶⁰ are claiming their place with increasing rigour and self-confidence, especially when it comes to defending their access to land, as well as to other symbolic and material resources.⁶¹ Struggles for land have

⁵⁰ C. Bates and M. Carter, ‘Tribal migration in India and beyond’, in *The world of the rural labourer in colonial India*, (ed.) G. Prakash (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 205–47. Dolly Kikon, ‘Jackfruit seeds from Jharkhand: being Adivasi in Assam’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2017, pp. 313–37. T. Middleton, *The demands of recognition: state anthropology and ethnopolitics in Darjeeling* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁵¹ Zehmisch, ‘The invisible architects of Andaman’, pp. 122–38.

⁵² Ghosh, ‘A market for aboriginality’, pp. 8–48.

⁵³ S. Sen, *Disciplined natives: race, freedom and confinement in colonial India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012), pp. 340–41.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 341.

⁵⁵ Andrea Muehlebach, ‘Making place at the United Nations: indigenous cultural politics at the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2001, pp. 415–48.

⁵⁶ Shah, ‘The dark side of indigeneity?’, p. 1807.

⁵⁷ Das, ‘Indigeneity, anthropology, and the Indian tribes’, pp. 22–27.

⁵⁸ Vinita Damodaran, ‘The politics of marginality and the construction of indigeneity in Chotanagpur’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2006, p. 184.

⁵⁹ Bengt Karlsson, ‘Anthropology and the “indigenous slot”: claims to and debates about Indigenous Peoples’ status in India’, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 4, p. 407. Ghosh, ‘Between global flows and local dams’, p. 519. L. Steur, *Indigenous mobilization: confronting electoral communism and precarious livelihoods in post-reform Kerala* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

⁶⁰ de Maaker and Schleiter: ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁶¹ In spite of numerous examples of political engagement, one cannot ignore the deep aversion many Adivasis have for the state: for example, Shah described that her Munda interlocutors in

turned into a central issue in Adivasi assertions of identity against dominant groups.⁶² Conscious of the need to project themselves as citizens of India, Adivasis often refer to the twin banners of custom and indigeneity when representing their communities.⁶³ As the term Adivasi has gained public visibility and a certain political legitimacy, it has been adopted as an analytical tool by academics, too.⁶⁴

Like in many fields of contemporary politics in India, communalism has affected the discourse on the idea of indigeneity, too: Hindu nationalists oppose the category of the Adivasi. Instead, they propagate the term 'Vanvasi', which is invoked to identify the early residents (*vasi*) of the forest (*van*) as supposedly early Hindus that once upon a mythic time retreated to the 'jungle' and therefore lost contact with mainstream Hinduism.⁶⁵ This struggle over a nomenclature must be viewed as part of a larger ideological project seeking to deny Adivasis a status as original dwellers of the Indian subcontinent, as this runs counter to the Hindu nationalist claim that the Aryans, who brought Vedic civilization to India, are the original inhabitants.⁶⁶

Multiple indigeneities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

For the sake of exploring historical genealogies of indigeneity and their political efficacy in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, one can employ three broad categorizations of Indigenous Peoples. First, the indigenous inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands have been affected in different ways by colonialism.⁶⁷ The Nicobars are currently inhabited by around 30,000 Nicobarese, who have traditionally sustained themselves by practising horticulture, fishing, hunting, and gathering; nowadays, many work for the government or in related white- or blue-collar professions, often accessed via the system of ST quota reservation. Employment opportunities have exposed many Nicobarese to the world outside their islands. After being severely affected by the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, which caused thousands of casualties and a 'tsunami of aid' in the period afterwards, many Nicobarese have adopted 'modern' economic

Jharkhand were convinced that tribal society was united and strong before the state arrived, hence the Munda desire to keep the state and its representatives away from their villages by embracing a traditional political system of inter-village governance. This 'sacral polity' derives its legitimacy from an indigenous cosmology, egalitarian and reciprocal values, and practices of consensus-building and mutual aid. A. Shah, *In the shadows of the state: indigenous politics, environmentalism, and insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 43.

⁶² Carrin, 'Jharkhand', p. 109.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Dasgupta, 'Introduction', p. 2.

⁶⁵ C. A. Gregory, 'Chhattisgarh: at the crossroads', in *The modern anthropology of India*, (eds) Berger and Heidemann, pp. 49–50.

⁶⁶ Das, 'Indigeneity, anthropology, and the Indian tribes', p. 12.

⁶⁷ Due to reasons of scope, this article does not summarize the complex history of the Nicobars. For a comprehensive account, see S. J. Singh, *In the sea of influence: a world system perspective of the Nicobar Islands* (Lund: Lund University, 2003).

practices, such as the use of money and consumption, which complement their indigenous practice of sustenance.⁶⁸

The second category comprises the indigenous hunter-gatherers of the Andamans.⁶⁹ A penal colony erected by the British in 1858 after the Mutiny/Rebellion lasted until 1942, when Japanese forces occupied the islands until the end of the Second World War. The establishing and maintenance of this settler-colony required the ideological creation of a sharp boundary to the other, 'savage' side of the frontier, embodied by the Andaman Islanders.⁷⁰ The transportation of convicts to clear the tropical forests for the expanding colony implied destroying the indigenous islanders' source of subsistence. These gathering and hunting communities resisted violently, but eventually lost out and were subjected to policies of cultural domination, co-optation, and assimilation.⁷¹ As a consequence of contact, the indigenous islanders, especially the Great Andamanese and the Onge, were infected with venereal diseases and epidemics such as measles and influenza, which caused their widespread demographic decimation as well as a gradual, but continual ethnocide.⁷² The spatial colonization of the islands must therefore be regarded as closely intertwined with the history of the gradual onslaught on its indigenous population. Here, the ideological justification for the very existence of a migrant and settler society was based on the settler-colonial negation of indigenous rights to land and self-determination.

Since 1947, colonial categories and knowledge production about the indigenous islanders have exerted considerable influence on the work of anthropologists, administrators, and activists, and continue to shape government policies. Until the turn of the millennium, the establishing of settlements and infrastructure as well as logging for the timber industry have caused constant extensions of the frontier into the tropical forests and, hence, extended conflicts with the indigenous hunter-gatherers.⁷³

Ranchis fall under the third category: indigenous migrants. The term encompasses members of a large array of tribal groups such as Oraon, Munda, Kharia, and smaller numbers of Gond, Nagbansi, Lohra, Chik Baraik, Kwar, Turi, Rautia, Maheli, Gusai, Kumhar, Bhumia, Bokta, and some others.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Venkat Ramanujam, Simron Jit Singh and Arild Vatn, 'From the ashes into the fire? Institutional change in the post-tsunami Nicobar Islands, India', *Society and Natural Resources*, vol. 25, no. 11, 2012, pp. 1–15.

⁶⁹ Presently, approximately 750 indigenous islanders, divided in four ethnic groups with significant cultural and linguistic differences, continue to exist: the Great Andamanese, Onge, Sentinelese, and Jarawa. See Zehmisch, 'Fluid indigeneities in the India Ocean', pp. 270–93.

⁷⁰ Udit Sen, 'Developing *terra nullius*: colonialism, nationalism, and indigeneity in the Andaman Islands', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2017, pp. 944–73.

⁷¹ Venkateswar, *Development and ethnocide*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.

⁷³ M. Chandi, 'Colonisation and conflict resolution: learning from reconstruction of conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous islanders', in *The Jarawa Tribal Reserve Dossier: cultural and biological diversities in the Andaman Islands*, (eds) P. Sekhsaria and V. Pandya (Paris: UNESCO, 2010), pp. 12–17.

⁷⁴ Most of these communities have been classified as STs in at least a number of Indian states, both in their 'traditional' territories as well as in places to which they migrated.

The local descendants of migrant labourers merged into a larger unit of identification known as the Ranchi community, conversing in their respective tribal languages, in Sadri—also known as Nagpuri, a lingua franca spoken in Chotanagpur—and in the local lingua franca, Andaman Hindustani.

The Ranchis' subaltern history needs to be regarded as closely intertwined with the Andamans' colonization. Since the first batch of Ranchi labourers was transported to the islands in 1918, aboriginality⁷⁵ has turned into their first and foremost mode of ascribed collective identification.⁷⁶ Based on the colonial typecasting of Chotanagpuri Adivasis as 'docile, submissive and hard-working coolies', the post-Independence administration followed the earlier practice of relying on Ranchi labour;⁷⁷ they continued to view these aboriginals as racially fit to accomplish the colonization of indigenous lands by clearing the tropical forests.⁷⁸ As aboriginals, they came to assist the state in a specific settler-colonial transformation: through forest clearance, the 'jungle'—which was inhabited by the Andamanese and thus marked as a space of savagery and wilderness—underwent an, at least symbolic, transformation into a civilized, ordered, and disciplined zone of settlement.⁷⁹

Ranchi labour was thus instrumental in providing patches of forest land for the settlement of partition refugees from East Bengal, Burmese and Sri Lankan repatriates, and landless people from all over the subcontinent.⁸⁰ Further, the thriving timber export industry once again demanded the provision of Ranchis as forest labour. Racialized ascriptions continue to inform both contemporary perceptions and representations of the Ranchis: settler communities still speak of Ranchis derogatorily as *gudna* (knee)—indicating a lack of intelligence and a proclivity to be hard-working and docile. Reflecting hegemonic discourse through strategic self-essentializations, many of my Ranchi interlocutors, in turn, also identify themselves with the same stereotype as hard-toiling and honest aboriginals.⁸¹

In line with their material and discursive exploitation, employers such as the Forest Department and various timber contractors, repeatedly abandoned Ranchi labourers when they shifted places of extraction or when their contracts had terminated. Many labourers, however, did not return to their homelands, but stayed, often in the same spaces they had previously cleared of vegetation.⁸² Representative of the voices of former labourers, one Ranchi interlocutor expressed a sense of collective ownership for these cleared

⁷⁵ Ghosh, 'A market for aboriginality', pp. 8–48.

⁷⁶ Zehmisch, 'The invisible architects of Andaman', pp. 122–38.

⁷⁷ Over 12,000 Ranchi labourers came to the Andamans between 1946 and 1956. G. Raju, 'Ranchiwalas: the pains of dispossession', *The Light of Andamans*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2010. Around 1970, there were around 15,000 Ranchi labourers in the Andamans. Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi, 'Development plans of the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: an action-oriented report', *Journal of Social Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1976, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Zehmisch, 'The invisible architects of Andaman', pp. 122–38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, p. 180.

plots: 'Where else should we have gone, since we had already lived in these forests for so many years?'⁸³

Due to their contribution to developing the island infrastructure through territorial expansion into indigenous lands, the Ranchis could be viewed as the 'invisible architects' of modern Andaman who have not been acknowledged by the authorities.⁸⁴ L. P. Vidyarthi, an anthropologist who consulted the local administration in the 1970s, suggested providing Ranchi encroachers with land as a reward for their services.⁸⁵ This suggestion may have been influenced by the fact that most of the tribal communities that fall within the category of Ranchis were classified as STs in their regions of origin. However, in 1984, this attempt to lend symbolic support to the Ranchis was turned on its head, when the Andaman administration, while demarcating reserved and protected forests, declared all non-indigenous residents on forest land as squatters.⁸⁶ Further, in 2002, a ground-breaking Supreme Court Order identified villages on forest land as illegal encroachments that needed to be removed in order to restore and conserve the unique biodiversity of the Andaman forests.⁸⁷ Since then, most Ranchi encroachers have been living with the constant psychological threat of a possible forceful eviction from their villages. Although evictions have happened several times, there has never been a full-scale eviction drive as this would render a huge population of the Andamans homeless and create social havoc.

During my fieldwork, I clearly observed the rampant socio-economic consequences of the Ranchis' permanent subalternization. The reach of state welfare in illegalized encroachments has been very limited ever since: Ranchi villages are characterized by badly functioning schools and the absence of electricity, metalled roads, canalization, and water supply. Additionally, when hunting and gathering or extracting building materials from the forests, villagers are regularly criminalized by wildlife laws and charged by forest officials; interlocutors have complaint that they are routinely discriminated against by bureaucrats in official matters, for example, when documents, registrations, or other official bureaucratic business need to be accomplished. Further, Ranchis are

⁸³ The expression of an ethical and legalistic consciousness as 'the original clearers' or first tillers of the soil, who enjoy superior rights to the land, may be paralleled to the historical term of the 'bhuinhar' in Chotanagpur. For a discussion of the transformation of the 'bhuinhar' through rural activism, closely linked to the influence of Christian missionizing, see Uday Chandra, 'Flaming fields and forest fires: agrarian transformations and the making of Birsa Munda's rebellion', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5–16.

⁸⁴ Zehmisch, 'The invisible architects of Andaman', p. 133.

⁸⁵ Vidyarthi, 'Development plans', p. 8.

⁸⁶ Raju, 'Ranchiwalas' battle cry', *The Light of Andamans*, vol. 35, no. 2, 13 August 2010.

⁸⁷ These policies may be regarded as being influenced by the intertwined discourses of climate change and environmental conservation, which are characteristic of the Anthropocene. Since the turn of the millennium, activism for the Andaman Islanders as well as a paradigm shift in forest policies—from resource exploitation to conservation—have put an end to most forest operations. Ruhi Deol and Philipp Zehmisch, 'Changing perceptions of environmental change, vulnerability, and adaptation in the Andaman Islands', *International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) Newsletter*, no. 85, 2020, pp. 40–41. Available at <https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/changing-perceptions-environmental-change-vulnerability-and-adaptation>, [accessed 21 June 2022].

commonly rejected when applying for jobs, either due to open racism (being called ‘dumb’ or ‘primitive’) or due to their lack of funds to pay the relevant bribes or social capital to receive ‘personal favours’ from individual bureaucrats. Exempting a small elite of Ranchis, who have reached a middle-class status through private employment or service against great odds, the majority of approximately 50,000 to 80,000 Ranchis has remained external to the avenues of social mobility provided by the state-directed local economy.

Local politics of indigeneity

As this article concentrates on analysing the difficulties Ranchi actors face when claiming ST status in the Andamans, one may assess the efficacy of these demands within the islands’ political landscape; here, different claims to an indigenous status by several communities coexist and, to a certain extent, compete with each other. Due to their visibility in the global public sphere, indigenous Andaman Islanders are at the centre of media attention and government intervention. This becomes evident when looking at recent media reports concentrating on how the Covid-19 pandemic may affect the ‘vulnerable’ tribes of the ‘isolated Andaman Islands’.⁸⁸ Another example that garnered worldwide attention was the assassination of the American John Chau by the Sentinel in 2018.⁸⁹ The event may be interpreted as a demonstration of indigenous sovereignty against the missionizing intentions of Chau. As the Andaman Islanders are counted among the few remaining communities of foragers in South and Southeast Asia, they seem to epitomize both evolutionary backwardness and ecological salvation. Consequently, they are frequently constructed as ‘ecologically noble savages’ by actors who are critical of capitalism and the anthropogenic destruction of Planet Earth.⁹⁰ Their changing public representation—from ‘primitive jungles’ (jungle-dwellers) to ecological and socio-cultural ‘others’—in the era of the Anthropocene may be attributed to a shift in administrative terminology, too: as hunter-gatherers, the Andamanese were earlier classified as ‘Most Primitive Tribal Groups’ (MPTG); recently they have been renamed as ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’ (PVTG).⁹¹

The devotion to protecting the PVTGs by both NGOs and the state has contributed to a burying of the Ranchis’ voices. For many years, Ranchi leaders have demanded affirmative action in higher education and government service under the guise of ST reservation. Further, recognition as STs indirectly also

⁸⁸ Cf. L. Givetash, “‘They’re so vulnerable’: Coronavirus hits tribes of isolated Andaman Islands’, *NBC News*, published online 2 September 2020. Available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/fears-rise-coronavirus-has-hit-remote-tribe-after-cases-confirmed-n1239045>, [accessed 21 June 2022].

⁸⁹ Michael Schönhuth, ‘Dead missionaries, wild Sentinelese: an anthropological review of a global media event’, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 35, no. 4, August 2019, pp. 3–6. A. Saini, ‘The lesson from this missionary’s death? Leave the Sentinelese alone’, *The Guardian*, published online 27 November 2018. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/27/missionary-death-sentinelese-andaman-islands>, [accessed 21 June 2022].

⁹⁰ Hames, ‘The ecologically noble savage debate’, pp. 177–90.

⁹¹ Das, ‘Indigeneity, anthropology, and the Indian tribes’, p. 18.

implies the recognition of encroachers' rights to the forest under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (Forest Rights Act or FRA), which would guarantee them claims of tenure, occupancy, and forest management, as well as provisions for local self-governance.⁹² However, with the discrimination they face, the few political spokespersons of the community encounter major difficulties in speaking up for their community and articulating a voice in the language of indigeneity. Hence, the possibilities of recognizing the Ranchis as indigenous are broadly determined by their emplacement as aboriginal migrants in the larger multi-ethnic island society.

The Ranchis' tribal positionality can be understood when looking at an example of public representation. On the occasion of the jubilee of the regional office of the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) at Port Blair in 2013, a local newspaper reported that a 'colourful tribal folk cultural programme was presented at the ASI auditorium reflecting the multifaceted culture of different tribal groups of these islands including Nicobarese and Ranchi communities'.⁹³ Such a performance of 'tribal aesthetics' demonstrates that a particular meaning is assigned to the Ranchis in their relation to the state: they are, similar to the Nicobarese, represented as 'ex-savages' on their way to modernization; by displaying their 'tribalness' for an audience considered as civilized, they function to assure the majority of their own 'evolution' to a higher level of human development; the 'gaze back' at indigenous peoples, who provide a 'window into humanity's past' through a ritualized display of 'primitive tradition', proves the capacity of the nation to draw those at the periphery into the mainstream. In contrast to 'free savages', that is, hunter-gatherers like the Jarawa or the Sentinelese, dancing Ranchis signify a reflexive consciousness of their tribal legacy, which, in other contexts, may be interpreted as an expression of their indigeneness; in fact, several states of the Indian union have recognized most ethnic groups covered under the label Ranchi as STs, even if they had migrated to another state, such as West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, but not Assam, where Chotanagpuri Adivasis face similar challenges to their claim of an ST status.⁹⁴

Such representations of Ranchis as 'disciplined tribals' are, of course, an indirect official recognition of their very indigeneity. In spite of their common cultural and socio-economic identification as tribals, the government and certain parts of the local civil society, especially politicians and indigenous rights activists, oppose the Ranchis' demand to be included in the ST list. They are concerned that if somewhat more 'developed' Chotanagpuri Adivasis were granted recognition as STs, they would compete with the indigenous STs; as the latter had largely been alienated from their lands by colonization, the

⁹² Ibid., p. 20.

⁹³ D. Giles, 'National seminar on hunter gatherers concludes', *Andaman Chronicle*, published online 7 May 2013. Available at http://andamanchronicle.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2609%3Anational-seminar-on-hunter-gatherers-concludes&catid=49%3Ahighlight&Itemid=200, [accessed 21 June 2022].

⁹⁴ Das, 'Indigeneity, anthropology, and the Indian tribes', p. 30. Kikon, 'Jackfruit seeds from Jharkhand', p. 320.

government changed its agenda towards the remaining communities from assimilation policies towards protecting these ‘dying savages’.

While the Andaman Islanders hardly utilize their quota of reserved seats and posts, the Nicobarese regularly avail themselves of ST reservations for government jobs or institutions of higher education. The Nicobarese form a powerful vote bank of the Indian National Congress (INC) and exert pressure on party politicians not to support the Ranchis’ claim. The argument goes that the Ranchis were migrants and not ‘sons of the soil’; as a result, they could not avail themselves of the same status as indigenous islanders. This case demonstrates the particular local trajectory that notions of indigeneity have so far taken in the islands: entangled in historical processes of settler-colonialism on indigenous lands, the discursive nexus Indigenous Peoples/Indigenous lands crucially informs both administrative and activist practices as well as political argumentation.

Overcoming a century of settler-colonial deprivation?

The recent centenary of Ranchi migration to the Andamans (1918–2018) deserves particular mention as it marks a history of oppression that has gone largely unacknowledged.⁹⁵ A history that is characterized by its lack of inscription into public memory vividly demonstrates the workings of subalterns’ exclusion from material and symbolic resources through the silencing of their voices. While the shape of oppression has admittedly transformed since 1918, I have so far highlighted the ways in which ideologies of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and domination have continued to shape everyday forms of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Having elaborated on the external hindrances to a recognition of the Ranchis as indigenous migrants, I will now concentrate on how different notions of indigeneity as political identity, namely of Adivasis and Vanvasis, intersect with internal religious, political, and socio-economic fragmentations of the community. These divisions have considerably weakened the Ranchis’ political unity as a community and, hence, their bargaining position towards the state.

The first aspect of internal division concerns the localized replication of communal conflict that is characteristic, albeit in more drastic and violent ways, of certain sections of the Indian mainland: the Ranchis are divided into sections of Christians, Hindus, and Sarna worshippers,⁹⁶ which are linked to competing systems of religious patronage. The Catholic majority of the Ranchis, for example, has strong affiliations with the Catholic Church as a global player that provides employment, funds for schools, hospitals, and so on; correspondingly, the fewer numbers of Ranchi Protestant sects are patronized

⁹⁵ P. Zehmisch, ‘Speaking about silence: one hundred years of Adivasi migration to the Andamans’, *Fieldsights*, published online 27 May 2020. Available at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/speaking-about-silence-one-hundred-years-of-adviasi-migration-to-the-andamans>, [accessed 21 June 2022].

⁹⁶ The Sarna movement started in the 1970s among the Santal as a form of revitalization of sacred traditions. Since then, it has come to encompass a large array of religious practices of Adivasis, largely linked to public possession at sacred groves of Sal trees. Carrin, ‘Jharkhand’, p. 112.

by their respective global networks. Resembling its role in Jharkhand, the Church articulates a voice for all subaltern Ranchis by referring to the notion of the Adivasi. Many of my Christian interlocutors tended to equate Christian culture with Ranchi culture.⁹⁷

In turn, some Hindu and Sarna worshippers in the Andamans subscribe to an identification as Vanvasi, which may be understood as an attempt by Hindutva politics to co-opt ST communities through a network of indoctrination and patronage. Correspondingly, certain sections of Hindu Ranchis have received patronage from the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, an all-India Hindutva organization that culturally indoctrinates STs into the belief that they are 'primordial Hindus'. Having increased its activity on the Andamans in the last two decades, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram spreads right-wing ideology and Hindu nationalism through a network of educational and healthcare facilities. Interlocutors of the Ashram in several villages emphasized that they worked to effectively curb the large number of conversions, which they ascribed to the economic and political power of globalized Christianity. In the Andamans, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram provides a combination of religious instruction and socio-economic patronage through a number of hostels for Adivasi children, in which they are taught about their supposedly forgotten Hindu identity. Apart from that, the Ashram celebrates Hindu festivals and arranges and conducts marriages and other rituals, which are streamlined by the Ashram towards incorporating Hindu custom. Hinduization has changed, among others, the ways in which some Hindu Ranchis conduct rituals, venerate goddesses, and apply rules of ritual purity and pollution.⁹⁸

These emerging politics of communal identification caused the Ranchis to perceive a deep internal divide on the basis of religious belonging. Among others, both the Catholic Church and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram came to sanction the reconstruction of a variety of traditional rituals such as the Karam festival, which ensures the protection of crops and the fertility of girls, which had not been celebrated earlier by the island diaspora.⁹⁹ Communal division thus complicates the Ranchis' possibilities of speaking in a strategically essentialized, united voice as a migrated or diasporic community-in-the-making—uniting under the label of indigeneity or, in this case, Adivasiness, when it comes to demanding political recognition and welfare from the state.

Apart from religious institutions, there are a few other civil society players, who have so far tried to take over the difficult task of articulating a voice for such a heterogeneous migrant group as the Ranchis. Few politically articulate Ranchis, who may be counted as middle-class citizens—many of them youngsters who have completed their higher education in Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh, where they were politicized to fight for Adivasi rights—have attempted to organize this numerically second-largest community in the islands as a 'vote bank' to put forward political demands. A limited number of my interlocutors had joined the local section of the INC, which had been

⁹⁷ Zehmis, *Mini-India*, p. 216.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–16.

the major political player in the islands until the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) garnered political success in the early twenty-first century. However, I encountered several cases where Ranchis had either left the INC or were seriously at odds with the treatment they had encountered. One interlocutor narrated how he was openly discriminated against as a primitive tribal by other members of the party, who would also block his rise in the internal party hierarchy. Another Ranchi leader had earlier left the INC and started a local chapter of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), but soon abandoned the attempt without gaining political mileage.

In 2016, I interviewed a Ranchi leader from the younger generation, who, at the time, studied law, after having acquired several other degrees. This emerging leader had, along with some others, established the so-called Jan Kranti Party (People's Freedom Party, JKP), a regional political party in order 'to fight for the rights of the Ranchi people', as he said. According to the vision of its leader, the party hoped to establish itself as an alternative to the mainstream political parties, the INC and the BJP, before the elections in 2019. However, due to the intricate workings of patronage-based politics as well as the lack of funding and informal political connections established by their leaders, the Ranchi vote bank did not stand united and hence failed to make headway during the last election. Broad support for the JKP was unlikely, because Christian Ranchis traditionally support the INC, while Hindus tend to support the BJP.

Another important player in the political field is the Ranchi Association. Similar to numerous other community organizations maintained by diasporic groups like the Bengalis, Tamils, Telugus, Malayalis, Local-Born, Moplah, and so on, this civil society organization functions to reconstruct and maintain a diasporic identity. Beyond that, the Ranchi Association articulates a political voice for the Ranchi community and demands rights and entitlements from the state. Through the association, Ranchi leaders bargain with various leaders of political parties, seeking to gain their support, for example, for their claim to ST reservations. Professing to exert strong influence over the fragmented Ranchi vote bank, they promise electoral support for politicians in exchange for their support of the association and the community's agenda. This dynamic causes, almost ritually before upcoming elections, politicians to promise certain collective benefits to the Ranchi electorate in order to mobilize them. However, numerous Ranchi interlocutors have expressed serious frustration about the hollowness of these promises; in their perception, they were lied to and used but never really supported by either politicians or bureaucrats.¹⁰⁰

As I have elaborated elsewhere on the Ranchis' anarchic attitude towards external domination and state power, I will just briefly summarize the main features relevant to this article.¹⁰¹ The Ranchis' institutionalization of partial

¹⁰⁰ See also *ibid.*, pp. 265–66.

¹⁰¹ P. Zehmisch, 'Undoing subalternity: anarchist anthropology and the dialectics of participation and autonomy', in *Negotiating normativity: postcolonial appropriations, contestations and transformations*, (eds) N. Dhawan, E. Fink, J. Leinius and R. Mageza-Barthel (New York: Springer, 2016), pp. 95–

self-rule through sustenance and state evasion in the margins of the state may be interpreted as an indigenous striving for subaltern anarchy.¹⁰² It may be regarded as a complementary feature of the Ranchis' worldview, which entails anarchic values of sharing, equality, and solidarity,¹⁰³ expressed in egalitarian and reciprocal values, and practised in the form of consensual decision-making and mutual aid. While the state is never entirely absent from the world of the Adivasi,¹⁰⁴ indigeness implies an antagonistic positioning against the state and capitalist exploitation. My interlocutors' frequent expressions of deeply ingrained aversion to the state and its institutions in many ways resembled the situation of the Munda in Shah's work on Jharkhand, which viewed the state 'as a recent and outside invention' by non-Adivasis that threatens their society.¹⁰⁵ Ranchis do, however, strategically engage with the state when it serves the purpose. Beyond that, one can observe frustration about their continued discrimination and lack of social mobility due to the absence of effective political leadership. Another reason why Ranchi leaders' voices are rarely listened to in the hegemonic framework of the state may be partly caused by the fact that many Ranchis do not support their leaders because they do not believe in their ability and power to bring about change. Further, characteristic of their anarchic values, most of my interlocutors were suspicious of any form of political leadership that is not based on the face-to-face practice of direct democracy at the village or community level.

In spite of the Ranchis' widespread alienation from the state system, one must take into account instances in which subaltern politics become manifest, such as in occasional public demonstrations of street power in the form of protests or strikes.¹⁰⁶ For example, every year Ranchi activists organize a march to remember Birsa Munda's *ulugan* (revolt);¹⁰⁷ further, in August 2010, Ranchi leaders mobilized around 5,000 demonstrators to demand their inclusion in the state list of STs.¹⁰⁸ The chief coordinator of the organizing Adivasi Coordination Committee, Agapit Kujur, spoke to a local newspaper about the protest's agenda:

109. Zehmis, *Mini-India*, pp. 285–95. Philipp Zehmis, 'Anarchie auf den Andamanen? Ethnographische Reflexionen zum Spannungsfeld von autoritärer Staatlichkeit und Strategien der Herrschaftsvermeidung im Indischen Ozean', *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 63, 2017, pp. 231–50.

¹⁰² Zehmis, 'Undoing subalternity', pp. 95–109.

¹⁰³ C. Macdonald, 'A theoretical overview of anarchic solidarity', in *Anarchic solidarity: autonomy, equality, and fellowship in Southeast Asia*, (eds) T. Gibson and K. Sillander (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2011), pp. 17–39.

¹⁰⁴ U. Chandra, 'Intimate antagonisms: Adivasis and the state in contemporary India', in *Indigeneity on the move*, (eds) Uddin, Gerharz and Chakkarath, pp. 221–39.

¹⁰⁵ Shah, *In the shadows of the state*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ Alf Gunvald Nilssen, 'Adivasis in and against the state: subaltern politics and state power in contemporary India', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2012, pp. 251–82.

¹⁰⁷ Chandra, 'Flaming fields and forest fires', pp. 1–30; Rahul Ranjan, 'Politics of symbolism: the making of Birsa Munda's statue in post-colonial Jharkhand, India', *Bandung*, vol. 7, 2020, pp. 130–61.

¹⁰⁸ Raju, 'Ranchiwalas' battle cry'.

This time it was 5000. We will put 10–15000 [sic] people on the road if necessary but will not budge from our demand for inclusion in State List of Schedule Tribe. We are not out to usurp anyone's rights. We demand what goes unutilized by the local tribe.¹⁰⁹

The language Kujur used was, of course, conscious of and sensitive towards the politically loaded fears of the Nicobarese that the Ranchis would compete with them for ST seats and overpower them. 'Not usurping anyone's rights' and only demanding 'what goes unutilized by the local tribe' implies that Ranchi leaders were actively searching to appease different political players in order to achieve their goals. For a short period after this protest, Ranchi political demands were prominent in media reports from the Andamans—in the long run, however, it did not significantly increase the Ranchis' visibility in public discourse. On the contrary, the insistence of some Ranchi leaders on qualifying for ST reservations backfired a couple of years later: in the aftermath of the protest, they had refused an official offer to be included in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) list. The leaders had argued that they could not receive affirmative action as OBCs; as 'true Adivasis', they were entitled to ST status, which for them was the only viable option. In retrospect, these leaders have faced serious criticism from their own community because their demand for ST reservations has not moved forward for several years. The critics argued that the community could, in the meanwhile, have availed itself of some kind of reservation, which would, at least, have benefitted a few qualified Ranchi youngsters.

I encountered the problem of raising an effective voice again during another spell of fieldwork in November 2016. Seeking to symbolically fight the injustice of 100 years of official neglect, some local Adivasi activists and leaders told me that they planned to highlight the centenary of Chotanagpuri migration. They were planning a *chakka jam*—a roadblock causing a 'total vehicle jam' that aims to bring all traffic in the islands to a standstill. One of them reasoned that they hoped to mobilize 80,000 Ranchis living in 150 villages across the islands in order to accomplish an ST status; or, as a compromise and compensatory move in case their recognition as STs was denied, quota reservations of government jobs for their community. However, the big gathering in Port Blair to commemorate the centenary, which had been planned on 30 December 2018, had to be cancelled because the prime minister, Narendra Modi, arrived at Port Blair on that day.¹¹⁰ This outcome reminds the observer of the workings of hegemonic logics and priorities within the state machinery, which crucially influence the Ranchis' capability to raise claims to their share of the 'reservation cake'. Nonetheless, as the system of popular welfare is designed to govern and administer people according to their particular demands of cultural identification and entitlement to differential treatment on grounds of vulnerability, backwardness, or historical injustice, it appears reasonable to strategically embark upon a re-examination of the hegemonic language of indigeneity provided by the system itself.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Zehmisch, 'Speaking about silence'.

Travelling indigenous knowledge

The Ranchis are trapped between their aboriginality, which defines an exploitative division of labour, and their non-recognition as local indigenes—as indigenous people *from*, but not *of* the Andamans. This conundrum may be explained by the fact that the notion of indigeneity is closely tied to indigenous cultural traditions and peoples' defence of their ancestral lands. Would it, instead, be possible to apply our understanding of indigeneity to contemporary insights about deterritorialization,¹¹¹ which are influenced by post-modern disruptions of the fixed entity of culture and place? In the following, I would like to think through the ethnographic example of the Ranchis' relations to the Andamans' environment and ontologies in order to move towards a more flexible, contemporary notion of indigeneity that considers various forms of indigenous movement. At the heart of this example, I aim to show that values, norms, and practices associated with an 'indigenous worldview'¹¹² can travel along with indigenous peoples to other places, where they can become manifest in a diasporic setting or situation.

After several decades in the Andamans, the meaning of the term 'Ranchi' has undergone significant transformation. Previously, it had denoted a subaltern labour force, consisting of various Adivasi communities that were recruited in Ranchi; now, the term describes an ethnicity-in-the-making based on the transcending of ethnic division through inter-group marriage and shared living conditions when it comes to relations to the environment and cosmology, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors.¹¹³ All these factors have come to create a strong sense of local belonging; from a geographical and ecological perspective, this sense of belonging may be understood when looking at characteristic place-making processes that emerged in multiple Ranchi villages situated on cleared forest spaces from the 1950s: reminded of the hilly landscape in Chotanagpur, the inhabitants often built their houses and gardens on elevations, while flat areas were reserved for fields and pastures.¹¹⁴ One can tentatively assume that gardens, houses, fields, fences, objects, places of communal worship and ritual, but also immaterial social and religious institutions were reconstructed according to collective ideas about social aesthetics¹¹⁵ and culturally learned *modus operandi* that were applied in the diasporic situation.

Place-making involves processes of knowledge transmission, too. Knowledge is never purely indigenous, but always borrowed, copied, shared, or stolen, and,

¹¹¹ Cf. A. Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹¹² R. Tabobondung, 'Indigenous perspectives on globalization: self-determination through autonomous media creation', in *Indigenous Peoples and autonomy: insights for a global age*, (eds) M. Blaser, R. de Costa, D. McGregor and W. D. Coleman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), pp. 134–35.

¹¹³ Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, pp. 209–26.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹¹⁵ D. MacDougall, 'Social aesthetics and atmospheres', in *Soziale Ästhetik, Atmosphäre, Medialität: Beiträge aus der Ethnologie*, (eds) P. Zehmisch, U. Münster, J. Zickgraf and C. Lang (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2018), pp. 21–26.

at the same time, local and global, as both forms intersect with each other. Indigenous knowledge is thus context bound and relational, and dependent on different qualities of knowledge circulation.¹¹⁶ Hence, my interlocutors' relations to the forest and marine environment can be attributed to localizations and adaptations of indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and a set of associated values, norms, and practices which, I claim, migrated with them from Chotanagpur and were transferred to diasporic locations in the Andamans. Departing from this observation, the following passages support the demand that the idea of indigeneity needs to be disentangled from its narrowly defined definition according to which 'ancient peoples inhabit a territory since times immemorial'.¹¹⁷ Instead, I argue that there should be more emphasis on viewing indigeneity as a cultural and ontological mode of existence that shows itself in the quality of peoples' relationship to the environment they inhabit—be it since 'times immemorial' or only for a few generations.

Oral histories I conducted among elder Ranchi interlocutors about how they remembered the first years after their arrival in the islands, confirm the transmission of indigenous knowledge and the quality of relationships developed with their surroundings. Coming from Chotanagpur, where local communities engage with their environments in multiple ways—for example, forests and villages are ontologically part of one sphere, one being the life force for the other's existence¹¹⁸—many Ranchis told me that they quickly felt at home in the Andamans. Numerous former labourers opined that they had developed a good understanding of the island ecology during timber operations in the forests; here, they replicated subsistence and survival strategies from their homelands in Chotanagpur: for example, they survived largely without medical supplies or tools needed for survival in the harsh forest and marine environment—replete with venomous snakes, human-eating estuarine crocodiles, centipedes, and, especially, heavy monsoon rains. They sustained themselves by hunting, gathering, and fishing, as well as by horticulture, small-scale agriculture, and by holding livestock.¹¹⁹ Common species the Ranchis hunt are wild

¹¹⁶ W. Sax, 'Postscriptum: the futures of indigenous medicine. Networks, contexts, freedom', in *Indigeneity on the move*, (eds) Uddin, Gerharz and Chakkarath, pp. 294–313.

¹¹⁷ My argument bears superficial resemblance to the contested position of Michèle Dominy, who wrote about assertions of a native status by white, sheep-farming settler descendants in the South Island high country of New Zealand in their political disputes with indigenous Maori over the land they have worked and lived on for several generations. The farmers assert their belonging to the land by putting emphasis on the intensity of their attachment to the environment, which is, among others, demonstrated through their transmissions of localized environmental knowledge, rendering them the custodians of the landscape. Dominy, 'White settler assertions of native status', pp. 358–74. Assessing the ethical legitimacy of claims of indigenous status, in Dominy's and my argument about the Ranchis in terms of ideas about global justice, it has to be pointed out that the Ranchis have experienced very different forms of exploitation and marginalization by imperial and neo-colonial agents than white settlers in New Zealand. Hence, the ethical base of both claims cannot be equated according to varying positionalities, even if the argument about attachment to the land draws upon certain parallels.

¹¹⁸ Damodaran, 'The politics of marginality', p. 182.

¹¹⁹ The majority of Ranchi labourers belongs to Adivasi communities that can be considered both small-scale farmers as well as forest-dwellers who hunt and gather. N. Bird-David,

boar, deer, pigeons, parakeets, ducks, cranes, herons, and bats. They also consume several species of saltwater fish such as mullet, jackerel, sardine, eel, and jackfish, as well as shellfish, molluscs, clams, slugs, and shells, which they forage at the seashore. Further, they catch freshwater prawns and fish from rivers and streams, and gather bamboo shoots, stems, and leaves, fern fronds, wild asparagus and different kinds of greens, wild flowers, forest fruits, and wild honey.¹²⁰ A scarcity of consumer goods led them to improvise from available ecological features; for example, they built carrying sticks, haystacks, threshing machines, and canoes out of wood, and baskets and walls of huts with bamboo, and used palm leaves for mats and thatches.

It is safe to argue that the Ranchis productively applied their previous knowledge of the Chotanagpuri environment as well as their ontologies to the island ecology. It can be speculated that their detailed understanding of the qualities of local flora and fauna derived from intense observation of species,¹²¹ their testing in a trial-and-error-system, and the creative utilization of such test results for various forms of sustenance. Observable among my interlocutors is that earlier generations of migrants have passed on their knowledge to subsequent generations. The Ranchis' sound embeddedness in the islands is further complemented by their ontological worldviews, including spirits inhabiting the forest and the sea.¹²² According to some interlocutors, most spirits were souls of ancestors who had travelled along with them from the mainland to the islands. Spirits can be either 'good' or 'evil'; for example, they can be invited to assist in cultivation or be used by malevolent individuals for black magic, such as the 'evil eye'. Spirits of people who committed suicide or who had experienced an unnatural death are viewed as potentially dangerous. Shiv Narain, an elder interlocutor who had been possessed twice by evil spirits, told me that these were usually souls who had been blown away by winds when travelling from one body into the next. Having found themselves lost between incarnations, they roam through the world or live in forests or graveyards, where humans are liable to become possessed by them.

My interlocutors' connection to the spiritual world may be regarded as another element of their successful adaptation to the novel Andaman environment. It is complemented by ontological attitudes towards the environment, which is understood as a giving agent providing means of subsistence. This phenomenon can be observed both among classified gatherers-hunters as well as among nominal agricultural groups who hunt and gather.¹²³ Such ontological worldviews and entangled relations with the environment may be

'Introduction: South Asia', in *The Cambridge encyclopaedia of hunters and gatherers*, (eds) R. Lee and R. H. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 233.

¹²⁰ Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, p. 241.

¹²¹ A recent ethno-ornithological study established that the Ranchis knew 84 different species of birds and had 47 distinct species names. Nitya Prakash Mohanty and Rohit Chakravarty, 'Ethno-ornithology of Karen and Ranchi inhabitants of the Andaman Islands: an annotated checklist of local names and etymology', *Indian Birds*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2018, pp. 73–78.

¹²² Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, p. 239.

¹²³ Bird-David, 'Introduction', p. 233.

categorized as ‘animist’.¹²⁴ The Ranchis’ spiritual embeddedness can be conceptualized as ‘Adi-dharam’ (the roots/beginnings of religious belief). This animistic religious system of Adivasis was identified by an Adivasi linguist, anthropologist, and political leader from Jharkhand, the late Ram Dayal Munda.¹²⁵ Representative of a middle-class, revivalist stance, contributions like Munda’s seek to embed Adivasi discourse within the global discourse of indigeneity, with the clear goal of instilling awareness and self-confidence among Adivasis through a reawakening of Adivasi culture.¹²⁶

The Ranchis’ ethnomedicine deserves special mention, as it demonstrates another dimension of ecological and ontological relatedness to their diasporic homelands. A Forest Department ranger, herself from a Ranchi background, had conducted PhD research on the ethnobotany of her community. During an interview in 2011, she associated the Ranchis’ vast knowledge of medicinal plants to their close adaptation to the environment, causing them to experiment with locally available species.¹²⁷ They found out, for example, how to treat wounds and cuts, centipede and snake bites, dysentery and asthma, cold and toothache; further, local plants are also used as bee and mosquito repellent or as an anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, and anti-viral remedy.¹²⁸ More detailed knowledge of local herbs is, however, monopolized by *vaidis* (*vaidya*: doctor, physician), non-professional ethno-medical practitioners, who specialize in the treatment of a few particular diseases and cases of spirit possession. *Vaidis* are perceived to be gifted by the divine with special qualities to connect the visible and the invisible, or spirits and the world of plants, animals, and humans to each other. They usually do not disclose the herbal composition of remedies and ingredients of healing rituals.¹²⁹

The observation that most Ranchis successfully fulfil the needs of both everyday food consumption and the practice of indigenous medicine on the basis of locally available species must be interpreted as a proof of their remarkable adjustment to the Andaman environment within a few generations—without having lived on primordial ancestral lands, but with an indigenous worldview. Being able to partly sustain themselves enables most Ranchis to maintain a certain independence from the outside forces of the market and the state, which may be interpreted as a striving for autonomy and autarky—an almost archetypal feature of Indigenous Peoples.

Conclusion: The Ranchis as indigenous subalterns

The dominance of discourses of ‘otherness’ and exoticism surrounding the Andamans and its indigenes crucially affected the Ranchis’ livelihoods and

¹²⁴ Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, pp. 9–18.

¹²⁵ R. D. Munda, *Adi-dharam: religious beliefs of the Adivasis of India* (Kolkata: Sarini, Birsa, Adivaani, 2014).

¹²⁶ Ghosh, ‘Between global flows and local dams’, p. 505.

¹²⁷ Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, p. 242.

¹²⁸ This information stems from an unpublished paper handed to me by the late Rauf Ali before his demise, called ‘Plant use by immigrant communities’ (no year).

¹²⁹ Zehmisch, *Mini-India*, pp. 239–40.

their political aspirations as subaltern and indigenous migrants.¹³⁰ Notions of aboriginality, linked to larger processes of the commodification of 'primitivism' and 'race' in the colonial labour market, became instrumental for the functioning of the Andaman regime of migration and its local division of labour. The continued (ab)use of colonial stereotypes, characterizing Ranchis as docile and hard-working 'primitive' tribals became efficacious in the form of continued subalternization and marginalization. As a consequence, the Ranchis have not been able to establish an image of themselves that transcends racial and evolutionary backwardness; they have so far remained confined in the racial niche between 'savages' and the more 'civilized' world of larger Andaman society. While 'primitivism' has continued to mark them as 'others', the Ranchis have never been recognized as 'primitive' enough to become targets of ST reservation policies, which the state regards as the privilege of the now largely museumized indigenous islanders.

Despite various frustrations faced in interactions with the state, one must acknowledge that many Adivasis do strategically engage with the state in order to gain material, symbolic, and other benefits. Being threatened by eviction and due to the necessity of articulating a voice for the Ranchis in order to achieve social mobility, community leaders and, as a consequence, the majority of my subaltern interlocutors have endorsed the political language of Adivasiness. In spite of that, repeated attempts to organize the community as a vote bank in order express demands on the basis of an Adivasi identity, and to achieve the clear goal of reservation as migrated STs have so far proven unsuccessful. The Andaman polity works according to a localized politics of indigeneness; from a governing perspective, it is illogical to accept migrated Adivasis as STs due to the official commitment to protect the more vulnerable PTGs, who are viewed as the indigenous STs of the islands.

The Ranchis' silence and invisibility in public discourse is largely a result of the fact that they do not speak up continuously and regularly as a united political force. On the one hand, there is an internal divide over welfare and patronage between Ranchi Christians and Hindus—under the influence of Hindutva ideology, the latter have increasingly resorted to declaring them as Vanvasis. Another major obstacle is the gap between voices trying to represent the community and the large majority who does not feel represented by politics at all. Speaking for and about the Ranchis is the privilege of non-subaltern members of the middle-class, whose voices are, somewhat reluctantly, tolerated in the discursive realm of civil society. These voices are taken over by the Ranchi Association, the Catholic Church, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, government servants of the community, and members of different political parties. The move to form a new regional Jan Kranti party for the Ranchis of Andaman and the failed preparations for a *chakka jam* in 2018 can also be read as the outcome of middle-class aspirations by a limited

¹³⁰ On the overlaps and tensions between subalternity and indigeneity, see Jody A. Byrd and Michael Rothberg, 'Subalternity and indigeneity in the here and now: problems of incommensurability and translation', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–12.

number of urban Ranchis trying to mobilize a subaltern majority under the banner of migrant indigeneity. This indirect, limited way of articulating voice can only construct subaltern Adivasis as dependent subjects of the state; it will hardly ever cause the Ranchis to be acknowledged as full citizens. Nonetheless, this strategy might efficaciously have an impact on both the field of electoral politics and the Ranchis' collective modes of self-definition in future. The conundrum lies in the fact that the only viable political option is to retain multiple Adivasi life worlds for those living in the margins of the state. This may be realized through a continuous, vocal engagement with the state by using the complicated and exclusionary language of rights and entitlements as provided by the hegemonic discourse of indigeneity.

The larger effect of these politics could be witnessed during my time in the field: the rampant marginalization, discrimination, and disenfranchisement implied in mechanisms of state and electoral politics caused many Ranchi interlocutors to consciously evade the outside world and the public sphere. This retreat led them mostly into the 'jungle', and many interlocutors claimed to be satisfied with their decision to settle in peripheral forests of the Andamans, because ecological resources were much more abundant than in their Chotanagpuri homelands and hence better suited for their survival. As a result, a good number of Ranchis live a partly self-sustaining and self-governed life in the social and ecological margins based on the application of indigenous knowledge.

The Ranchis' smooth adaptation to the Andaman environment also demonstrates the crucial role of indigenous and subaltern ethics, values, and practices in the making of the Andamans as their diasporic homeland—a place to survive and, finally, to live modestly, but well, and to stay.¹³¹ The Ranchis' approach towards the environment and the cosmic world of the Andamans should, therefore, be accepted as indigenous. As all Indigenous Peoples were, once upon a time, migrants, it makes sense to endorse a non-essentialist definition of indigeneity that is not tied to the ancestral land/culture nexus. Instead, this definition aims to concentrate on what indigenous actors do: their way of life, their human-environment relations, their kinship system, and, most importantly, their self-definitions as indigenous based on the common experience of historical and current disenfranchisement by states or majority populations.

Competing interests. None.

¹³¹ For an account of the dynamics of ethical self-understanding among Adivasis in South India, see Ulrich Demmer, 'The poetics and politics of practical reason: indigenous identity, ritual discourse, and the postcolonial state in the Northern Nilgiris', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 73, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 111–37.

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