

## Postscript

---

This book has attempted to discuss two crucial vectors in the history of the Indian nation-state – language and land.<sup>1</sup> In tracking the history of the regional linguistic politics in Odisha, I have spoken of land as territory. This is how it has featured in geopolitical discussions in Odisha and at the center in the debates and memoranda related to the States Reorganization Committee. However, by bringing the history of the making of the Indian citizen into this context of apportioning territory to languages, I have sought to raise the figure of the adivasi as a means to disrupt this totalizing narrative of territorial division. In Chapter 6, we saw how claims to regional territory often employed a language of trusteeship when it came to arguing for the inclusion of areas inhabited by adivasi communities in provinces such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, or West Bengal. This language of trusteeship was then coupled with a claim that the adivasi communities had a long history of shared everyday life with the Odia, Telegu, or Bengali communities and, therefore, it was in their best interests to be coupled with these larger linguistic communities.

By the early 1940s, the notion that India was a composite of linguistic regions had come to serve as the orthodox understanding of the new nation. An article in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* described the relationship between the region and nation in the following way:

Indian Nationalism is of a composite character, no useful purpose will be served by ignoring facts, or by trying to twist them to suit a particular theory, nor will it be helpful for us to import analogies from Europe and America for guidance of our conduct, as thousand years of eventful history have gone to the making of the different sub-nations that inhabit the Indian soil. The proper adjustment of our mutual relations demands that we should recognize our unity as well as our diversity. Any attempt to grind us into a dull, dead uniformity in the name of our common nationhood is bound to cause friction, and end in disruption. Provincialism, rightly understood and kept within proper limits, is quite a healthy phenomenon, and is nothing to be ashamed of. There is no disguising the fact that an Oriya, Bengali or a Gujarati feels his kinship with a fellow

<sup>1</sup> I use land here to reference two kinds of geographical category – space and territory.

provincial much more keenly than he does with a Tamilian or a Panjabi, and this is true with rare exceptions of the members of every provincial group. To ignore this fact is simply to misunderstand the nature of Indian nationhood, and store up trouble for the future. It is time that the composite character of Indian nationhood were properly understood. India is not and never will be one uniform nation in the sense in which France and Germany are nations, and any attempt to cast the different peoples that inhabit this country into one uniform cultural and linguistic mould is sure to end in failure and possibly lead to disaster. We must recognize both unity and diversity and must not seek to justify any wrong step by importing false analogies from outside.<sup>2</sup>

This caution against the dangers of understanding India within the framework of European and American examples of “uniform nationhood” presents provincialism as both constitutive of and a threat to the Indian nation. The tone of the article suggests that provincial linguistic difference is an immutable feature of the Indian nation: “[A] thousand years of eventful history have gone to the making of the different sub-nations that inhabit the Indian soil.” Presenting the provincial allegiances as subnationalism gives these provincial units a great degree of legitimacy in the political context of both anticolonial nationalism in India and the broader discussions of freedom and self-determination taking place around the world as World War II raged in Europe and Asia. Also, references to thousands of years of eventful history naturalizes provincialism in India. Provincialism is a fact of Indian life according to this article. Therefore, any nation-building strategy that denies this fact would necessarily run the risk of being undermined by the arguably legitimate force of these provincialisms. Hence, if not understood properly provincialism could disrupt the Indian nation. Here lies the threat of provincialism.

Therefore, provincialism had to be “rightly understood and kept within proper limits.” Provincialism had to be managed properly for the Indian nation to thrive. The solution posed by the article to the conundrum of provincialism suggests that rather than thinking of provincialism as the disruptive force, provincialism is acknowledged as an important feature of Indian national life – it represented the diversity of India even as it mediated any discussion of the unity of India. Provincialism served as the quintessential diversity that is at the root of the unity of India. And, as Nehru argued, this unity is not simply based on a transcendence of diversity. Rather, the acknowledgement of diversity enables unity to survive.

So far, the idea of Indian nationalism posed by this article is very positive and difficult to take issue with. But, as the history of the shift in

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Orissa Domicile Committee, *Report of the Orissa Domicile Committee* (Bhubaneswar: Government of Orissa, 1943), p. 22.

Odia attitudes to anticolonial politics and Indian National Congress politics discussed in Chapter 3 suggests, the acknowledgement of provincialism appeases the proponents of provincial identity (the provincial elite) and this appeasement enabled the provinces to commit to participating in a collective idea of Indian nationalism. The question of appeasement only arises because of the hegemonic status enjoyed by the regional elite in provinces such as Odisha. In the case of Odisha, we have seen that in the sphere of linguistic activism (Chapter 1), literature (Chapter 2), politics (Chapter 3), and history (Chapters 4 and 5), the regional cultural politics systematically produced a regional orthodoxy that provided a very clear narrative of what it meant to be Odia.

At the center of this orthodoxy was the idea of an Odia citizen subject who was simultaneously and unequivocally Indian. This Odia citizen had to be distinct from other regional subjects. As the discussion of Odia language and history in Chapters 1 and 5 illustrate this distinctiveness of the Odia subject was maintained through a claim that the Odia language and people were different from their neighbors because of the shared early life of Odia and its close adivasi neighbors. Unlike other regional communities, the Odia language and people developed in close harmony with nearby adivasi communities – this early shared life is evident in the number of adivasi words that existed in the Odia language. While this distinctiveness enabled the Odia regional movement to respond to encroachment from Bengali and Telegu regional politics, it also produced an enduring anxiety about the ethnic and linguistic proximity of the adivasi. As we have seen in the book, the response to this anxiety was to simultaneously assimilate and render invisible the adivasi element in the population of the new Odisha province.

It is striking that, in the case of Odisha, the domiciled Bengalis and Telegus are described as minorities but the adivasi communities who constitute about a fourth of the population are never referred to as a minority. Their difference from the majority Odia community is obscured by narratives of shared everyday life and adjacent origins. This distinction is particularly stark in the treatment of minorities within the report of the Orissa Domicile Committee. When discussing the need to introduce protective measures for minorities within Odisha, the members of the committee referenced the global guidelines on what constitutes a minority provided by the League of Nations. According to these guidelines, a distinct community had to constitute between five and twenty percent of the population to be acknowledged as a minority within the territory of the nation. The committee report used these guidelines to judge whether the domiciled Bengali and Domicile Telugu communities of Odisha qualified as minorities in the province and decided that they did

not. This led them to claim that Odisha was a fairly homogenous region. However, when trying to isolate the presence of a minority community within the region, no mention of the collected adivasi communities is made even though they accounted for one fourth of the population of Odisha. The reason they could not be counted as a minority in 1943 is because they had already been claimed as essentially Odia in the 1930s when the boundaries of the new province of Orissa was formed. My discussion of the various memoranda submitted to the States Reorganization Commission reveals that a very similar process of assimilation and elision happened in other provinces with large communities of adivasis as claims were made that the adivasi populations of India would be best served by being coupled with neighboring non-adivasi linguistic groups.

I would like to end the book with a question: Was it really in the best interests of the adivasis of Odisha to be so “absorbed” into the Odia community? Since 1947, close to three million people have been displaced by development-related projects in Odisha. Almost half of this number belong to adivasi communities.<sup>3</sup> It appears that Jaipal Singh’s impassioned plea in the Lok Sabha in 1956 that the impact of postcolonial development projects on adivasis needs to be addressed as instances of “disrupted humanity” rather than remain unheard in the growing celebration of postindependence developmental projects, like the Hirakud Dam, as feats of engineering was quite astute. In the 1950s, the Hirakud Dam project displaced 325 villages with an estimated population of 100,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Protests against the building of the dam did take place but were eventually drowned out by a competing statist narrative that framed the adivasi loss of land as their sacrifice in the interests of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

This notion of sacrifice for the nation needs attention. It is based on the assumption that the adivasi communities do share the same destiny as the majority of the Indian population and that the sacrifice of land is in the interest of the greater good. It assumes that this sacrifice will effectively enhance the socioeconomic life of everyone in the national community. However, events since the 1950s illustrate that those who sacrificed their land have not been the beneficiaries of the decades of development policy in India. In fact, the alienation of adivasi land has had catastrophic consequences for the displaced people of Odisha. Felix Padel and Samarendra Das have characterized these consequences as cultural

<sup>3</sup> Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, “Cultural Genocide and the Rhetoric of Sustainable Mining in East India”, *Contemporary South Asia* 18 (2010): 335–6.

<sup>4</sup> Arun Kumar Nayak, “Big Dams and Protests in India: A Study of the Hirakud Dam”, *EPW* 45 (2010): 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

genocide. While the early postcolonial state took over private land for development projects that were state funded, a more recent state-sponsored land grab has been in the service of the growing private investment in the mineral rich parts of Odisha.<sup>6</sup> Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand have the largest number of people displaced due to new mining projects.<sup>7</sup> Between 1960 and 1995, 300,000 people were displaced in Odisha and between 1980 and 1995, 402,282 people were displaced in Jharkhand. Padel and Das suggest that this displacement in the case of adivasi communities amounts to “cultural genocide” because the loss of land often means the disruption of their social structure, land ownership, economic self-sufficiency, and religious customs. They are forced into urban spaces as landless laborers or relocated into “colonies of alien design,” which bear no resemblance to their erstwhile life. As the adivasis of Odisha became displaced from their land, they ended up dissolving into the majority population and lost their particular identity as Khond or Munda.<sup>8</sup> As a leader of the Adivasi resistance to the Utkal Alumina project in Kshipur, Bhagaban Majhi argued:

Our fundamental question is: how can we survive if our lands are taken away from us? We are tribal farmers. We are earthworms [*Matiro poko*]. Like fishes that die when taken out of water a cultivator dies when his land is taken away from him. So, we won't leave our land. We want permanent development.<sup>9</sup>

The adivasi resistance to these projects has met with middleclass apathy and sometimes with state violence. The Kalinganagar police shootings of 2006, which killed thirteen adivasi protesters who were opposing the building of the Kalinganagar Tata steel plant, illustrated the Odisha state approach to this issue. Even though the alienation of adivasi land is unconstitutional, the Odisha state government has consistently made efforts to circumvent the dictates of the constitution to enable legalizing state-sponsored land grab.<sup>10</sup> The Odia middleclass see the postcolonial

<sup>6</sup> Walter Fernandes, “Tribal or Indigenous? The Indian Dilemma”, *Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 102 (2013): 385. “Orissa had used 100,000 acres for industries in 1951–1995 but acquired 100,000 acres more in the succeeding decade.”

<sup>7</sup> See Minati Sahoo, “Mining and Land Acquisition: An Analysis of Mineral Rich Tribal Regions in Odisha”, *Journal of Third World Studies* 32 (2015): 153–74. Between 1960 and 1995, 300,000 people were displaced in Odisha and between 1980 and 1995 402,282 people were displaced in Jharkhand.

<sup>8</sup> Padel and Das, 336. See also Hari Mohan Mathur, “Investor-Friendly Development Policies: Unsettling Consequences for the Tribal People of Orissa”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 10 (2009): 318–28.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Padel and Das, *ibid*, 336.

<sup>10</sup> For a legal history of eminent domain in Odisha during the colonial period, see Sankaran Krishna, “Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Destitution: Law, Race and Human Security”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 40 (2015): 85–101. And for

Odisha state government efforts to attract private investment as a means to make Odisha a “modern hub of prosperity.” The protesters are called “antigovernment” and “antidevelopment.” They have been accused of being “Maoists.” Padel and Das have argued that this accusation is “for the most part quite false.”<sup>11</sup>

Socioanthropological research on the cultural framing of the protests against state neglect of the more vulnerable communities in Odisha has shown how the adivasi complaints about state neglect are framed as instances of regional embarrassment. Odia leaders display an anxiety about how Odisha is viewed in metropolitan circles as a “feudal” place that is overrun by “*nange-bhuke* [people, often tribal], nearly naked, hungry and eating only very basic food of rough rice.”<sup>12</sup> They argue that public episodes undermine Odia prestige: “Orissa has great cultural riches and we do not want its prestige tarnished.” Orissa’s prestige is also presented as an essentially Hindu prestige: “Orissa has Lord Jaganath as Protector; he is guiding and watching.”<sup>13</sup> While Lord Jaganath is seen as the protector of the poor there are instances where religion is also used as a justification of the suffering of the adivasis. Sometimes, officials are found saying: “[I]t is their Dharma – they are meant for it” and “it is not the government’s job to heal and feed them, it is Lord Jaganath’s will.”<sup>14</sup>

This displacement of responsibility from government to the regional deity echoes of early twentieth-century Odia nationalist definitions of regional community. In the 1920s and 1930s nationalists and historians had argued that the Odia community was a single community in spite of adivasi/non-adviasi difference because of the unifying force of the Jaganath cult. This claim allowed the mainstream leaders to incorporate the sizable adivasi minority populations into the Odia regional community – thus justifying the Odia claims to border districts like Ganjam, Koraput, and Sambalpur. However, this incorporation was founded on what Gopabandhu Das called expansive humanism (*udaar manabikata*) of the Jaganath cult. This humanism, rather than common political and administrative unity, enabled adivasi/non-adviasi unity. By founding unity on extragovernmental force of religion, this claim to humanism served more as an abstract promise of protection rather than a concrete legislation of equity and protection. It allowed for the new Odisha state to

a postcolonial history, especially of the Samantha judgment, see Mathur, “Investor-Friendly Development Policies”, 318–9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Rew and Shahzad Khan, “The Moral Setting for Governance in Keonjhar: The Cultural Framing of Public Episodes and Development Processes in Northern Orissa, India”, *Oxford Development Studies* 34 (2006): 107.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 107. <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 108.

claim the adivasis as Odia without empowering them as equal citizens of the province.

Effectively, the humanism of Gopabandhu Das has met its limit in the politics of postcolonial development. The divine humanism of Das that made adivasis into citizens through the act of pilgrimage to Puri or the socialism of Nehru that gave entry into the national community to adivasis through an act of sacrifice have both failed to fulfill their promise in postcolonial India.