

Shades of Wildness

Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India

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IN HIS QUIRKY FIRST novel, *The Prevalence of Witches*, originally published in 1947, Aubrey Menen tells the story of an Education Officer posted to Limbo, “six hundred and fifty miles of clumsy hills and jungle” in British India. Here, “for a thousand years the inhabitants had shot at everybody who came into it with arrows and their aim was usually adequate to their purpose of keeping people out; where the bowmen failed to get home, the mosquitoes did not” (Menen 1989, 1). Soon after the Education Officer’s arrival, the village chief kills his wife’s paramour. The chief does not consider himself responsible for the act; he feels that he has been pushed into it by a witch. The rest of the story skittles around the funny and increasingly improbable efforts of the Political Agent (Catallus), the Education Officer, and two others to save the chief, awaiting trial in prison, from being sentenced for this crime. They arrange a miracle to convince the Judge that what the Limbodians practice is a religion and that the chief should be let off since he was only practicing his religion. But the Judge, a Mr. Chandra Bose, is a member of the Rationalist Press Association and treats the miracle merely as an interesting case of mass hysteria. Eventually, Catallus slips the key to the jail to the chief, who then escapes from prison.

Limbo is modeled, and very closely at that, on Dangs in western India, a 655-square-mile forested and hilly region, which during British rule was managed by the Political Agent of Khandesh district in Bombay Presidency. Menen was an Education Officer in Dangs in the 1940s, and he drew on his experiences for the novel (Menen 1970). Like Menen’s characters, nineteenth-century Khandesh Political Agents often agonized over the rightness of trying Dangi men accused of killing witches. They tried to resolve their predicament by awarding light sentences. In 1847, for example, a Bhil chief was sentenced to three years’ rigorous imprisonment for killing a witch. On other occasions, judges often recommended that the death sentences (which they were bound by law to pass) be commuted by higher authorities.¹

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¹See, for example, *MSA.PD.1847.Vol 21/1902. Comp 783, MSA.PD.1876.Vol 108.Comp.1929, MSA.PD.1898,Vol 75. Comp 798.*

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Why should it have been so difficult to be tough on witch killers? Colonial officials sometimes claimed that this was because groups like the Dangis did not think that they were doing anything wrong in killing witches. But surely there was more to the ambivalence of colonial officials than this. After all, it could be fairly argued that men who forced women into *sati* (widow immolation), who resorted to *thagi* (a form of banditry), or who practiced female infanticide, were all doing the right thing by their own lights. Yet this consideration did not for long seriously deter the British when dealing with such cases—even if other considerations did (Mani 1989).

Perhaps a more satisfying understanding of British reluctance might be possible if we were to venture into the thickets of the colonial distinction between castes and tribes. By the mid-nineteenth century, as is well known, colonial officials routinely distinguished between the castes and tribes of India, seeing the two as fundamentally different. In many ways, that distinction persists today: the groups classified by the Indian government as Scheduled Tribes are usually those formerly called tribes by the British (Bates 1994). Here, I would like to argue that the distinction between castes and tribes drew on and was made possible by colonial constructions of wildness.

I do not say this only in the simple sense that British officials often referred to the “wild tribes,” or in the sense that the tribes were considered wild while the castes were considered civilized. After all, colonialism was founded on the impossibility of its civilizing mission, on what Partha Chatterjee has so evocatively called “the rule of difference”—the idea that the colonized were fundamentally different from the colonizers (Chatterjee 1993). If the difference between the colonizers and the colonized were to be erased, there would be no justification for colonial presence. In this sense, colonialism always involved construing the colonized as wild, whether tribes or castes. The difference between tribes and castes was not, for most British officials, one between the civilized and the wild; it was rather about different forms of wildness, each with its distinctive politics of gender and time.

Anachronism, or the Politics of Time

The distinctive relationship with time involved in colonial constructs of tribes could be described, adapting an argument from Fabian (1983), as one of anachronism. What I mean by anachronism is perhaps well brought out by placing it in relationship to orientalism. Though deeply intertwined and even constitutive of each other, the two discourses are also fundamentally different. As is well known, orientalism focused most sharply on the cultural essences of subordinated societies, ascribing them singular qualities, and individuating them with reference to each other in order to create a universal typology.

In contrast, anachronistic thought ranked these societies in relation to each other, situating them above all in relation to time, or, more specifically, in relation to the modern time that was epitomized by Europe. Different societies were thus ranked according to how much behind the time of Europe they were. The specific time that societies occupied—the question of how “advanced” they were—was measured by various criteria. Levels of technology provided one scale (Adas 1989). The race theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were another gauge (Banton 1989; Robb 1995). Similarly, the four modes of subsistence—hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce—served after the mid-eighteenth century as a means to rank various societies. Yet other theories explained differences between societies by reference to variations in the climate (Meek 1976).

Furthermore, the geographical provenance of the two discourses diverged. Orientalism was most visible in colonial conceptions about regions like China, India, or the Arab world. These, significantly, were the societies that by colonial criteria were relatively advanced, close to the time of Europe: they were all, for example, thought to have been great civilizations at some stage in their history (Marshall and Williams 1982). In this sense, they were like Europe. It may be, in fact, that orientalism defused their perceived potential challenge to the certitudes of European cultural superiority. By specifying a static Chinese, Arab, or Indian essence, these apparently comparable societies were distanced and rendered irrefragably different from a more dynamic Europe.

In contrast, anachronistic thought was more far-ranging, covering both these “civilized” regions and the large parts of the Americas, Africa, Australia, or the forest regions of India, considered beyond the pale of civilization. The hierarchies of technology, for example, situated the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Europe within a single comparative hierarchy. Often, anachronistic thought focused on the “primitives” or “aborigines”—on those who were wild because they were at the bottom of the civilizational heap. The “wild man,” of course, had been an abiding concern of European popular and elite culture, going back at least to medieval times (Bernheimer 1952; Dudley and Novak 1972; Bartra 1994). But in addition to this older sense, the figure of the primitive was also wild in a new sense, where the wild was separated from civilization by time: the conceptual opposite of the primitive, after all, was the modern (Kuper 1988).

In all of this, anachronistic thought was intimately linked to evolutionist beliefs and theory. The latter located primitive societies in the present only to separate them by time—to reposition them as survivals from a past that had been outgrown by the modern. Anachronistic thought refigured this separation: it was concerned primarily with creating *in the present* a universal taxonomy of primitives, and more broadly of various societies. That is to say, while the primitive was on the one hand separated by time and placed in the past, that past was then arranged hierarchically and spatially mapped in the present (cf. Fabian 1983). The primitive in the present thus represented the lowest point in a comparative taxonomy of which European civilization represented the summit. And the certitude about the inferiority of primitives made them “good to think with” about Europe. In the nineteenth century, it became quite commonplace to compare women, children, criminals or the underclasses of Britain to primitives (Kuklick 1991).

Anachronism was constitutive even of that classically orientalist trope of colonial discourse—caste (Inden 1990; Dirks 1992). It was an article of faith amongst many nineteenth-century colonial officials that there had been an Aryan invasion into India from Central Asia in the remote past, and many British ethnographers even ranked castes by reference to the degree of Aryan or Dravidian blood, treating those castes presumed to have more Aryan blood as superior (Bates 1995). This has led Susan Bayly (1995, 168) to suggest in a stimulating article that, contrary to our usual understanding,

writers who are thought of now as compilers of *caste* data often treated the values and ideology of “caste” as a subsidiary issue . . . [they] were much more concerned with a wider body of speculative scholarship in which the biological and moral qualities of “race” were perceived as universal human endowments.

For some colonial ethnographers such as Risley, she goes on to point out, castes were “really ‘races’, and the distinction between high and low castes was really a distinction between peoples of supposedly superior and inferior racial endowment.”

The question evidently cannot be which of these is the “real” caste—that of orientalism or anachronism? That would be a naive and fruitless question. Rather, it is necessary to recognize that involved here are two different ways of classifying colonized societies: the first focused on the essence of India, the second on universalistic and comparative taxonomies. It was precisely the intersection of the two that defined and gave force to colonial categories.

The tropes of anachronism were even more evident in the colonial construction of the category “tribe.” The grounds for the distinction between castes and tribes was already being laid by the late eighteenth century. William Jones’s theory about an Aryan invasion that displaced the original inhabitants implied the existence of an Aryan and a Dravidian race (Bates 1995). The widely disseminated experiences of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century officials, most importantly amongst them those of James Cleveland in Bhagalpur, seemed to indicate that hill and forest communities were different from those in the plains (Briggs 1852). It was widely felt by the early nineteenth century that the former, though spread all over India, shared much in common.

But no single term had as yet emerged for them. Through the 1820s and 1830s, the Bhils were attributed adjectives such as “wild,” “savage,” “plundering,” or “predatory,” and nouns like “groups,” “bands,” “tribes,” “races,” or even “castes.” It is only by the 1840s that they begin to be described more consistently (though not yet exclusively) as tribes, usually as “aboriginal, forest, or hill tribes.”² As late as 1852, John Briggs could propound a thesis that he hoped would be interesting, “if it be only for its novelty.” And the thesis was:

We have heard, it is true, for a series of years, of races of Hill-people in different parts of India; and latterly the accounts of them have crowded in upon us from many directions. Some have called them aborigines, without troubling themselves about their origin; while others have considered them Hindus expelled from their caste for some misdemeanour; but no one seems to have entertained the idea that the numerous communities which have been found spread over the surface of India were the inhabitants of the country before the Hindus, or that those communities had one common origin.

(Briggs 1852, 275)

Such arguments soon became much-purveyed common sense. Tribals or aboriginals were seen as the descendants of the original inhabitants of India, whereas the upper castes were descendants of Aryan invaders. Beaten back by the invaders, but still desirous of retaining their independence, the aboriginal tribes had retreated to the hilly and forested parts of the country. In 1852, Briggs had already provided a list of differences between aborigines and Hindus: Hindus had caste divisions, aborigines did not; Hindus did not eat beef, aborigines did; Hindu widows did not remarry, aborigine widows did; Hindus abhorred the spilling of blood, aborigines reveled in it; Hindus ate food prepared only by their own castes, aborigines ate food prepared by anyone; and so on. It was recognized, of course, that racial differences were often not so sharp in practice; that intermixing between the aborigines and the invaders had created some new castes; that tribes often became castes through the

²See the voluminous file *NAI.FD.23.11.1844.F.C. 116–47* for a broad sampling of material from the 1820s. See also Bhil Agent to Collector, Ahmednagar, 28.8.1839, *NAI.FD.24.2.1840.F.C. 18–20*; Pringle to Willoughby, 1.7.1842, *NAI.FD.23.11.1844.F.C.116–47*.

adoption of caste customs; or that many aborigines did not eat beef. But this recognition did not seriously undercut the conventional British understanding that aborigines were racially and culturally distinct from the Hindus. And by the 1860s the distinction between castes and tribes had almost entirely crystallized.

The basic characteristic of these aborigines or tribes in colonial accounts was that they were primitive. As such, they were thought to be comparable or even racially linked to primitives elsewhere in the world. The ethnologist Thurston, for example,

was convinced . . . that several of the tribes of southern India, who were of the race "Homo Dravida" (as he called it) had more in common with Australian aboriginals than their Aryan or high-caste neighbours. The use of the boomerang by Kallan and Maravan warriors in South India he believed to be convincing evidence of this, whilst the prevalence of tree-climbing amongst the Kadirs of the Anamalai hills, as amongst the Dayaks of Borneo, he clearly believed to indicate that both shared some previous evolutionary origin.

(Bates 1995, 245)

In western India, the general intelligence of the Dangi Bhils was sometimes thought to be "little superior to animals." In their animality, as in their belief in witches, they were considered quite like the Zulus of Africa.³

Making Primitive

But how did some communities come to be classified as wild tribes while others leap-frogged to the more cerebrally elevated status of castes? Some distinction was already drawn in precolonial eighteenth-century western India between forest communities like the Bhils or the Naikras, on the one hand, and the communities in the heartlands of settled agriculture. One "common imprecation" amongst cartsmen in western India, for example, was "May the Malivads take you" (Government of Bombay 1880, 28). And the Bhils, we are told by John Malcolm, often justified their raids by describing themselves as "Mahadev's thieves" (Malcolm 1825, 89). But as I argue in my book (Skaria forthcoming), this was not really an opposition between the wild and the civilized. Values associated with being *jangli* or wild were central not only to forest communities but also to surrounding plains communities. In this sense, while Indian practices could have been interpreted to support the colonial distinction between tribe and caste, it was scarcely a continuation of these practices.

The distinction was rather a product of colonial theories and practices. The intersection of several characteristics and hierarchies defined the anachronistic space occupied by savages or primitives. Basic amongst these from the mid-eighteenth century was the hierarchy of modes of subsistence. Hunting was considered the lowest stage in social evolution; it was succeeded by pastoralism and then agriculture, and industry was the culmination of development. One characteristic that was shared by many groups that eventually became "tribes" was their dependence on hunting. Their agriculture was usually of a shifting sort—easily classified as antecedent to settled agriculture. Even if (as was the case with the Bhils) only a section of the community lived by these "primitive" modes, the entire community was classified as a tribe, and those who practiced settled agriculture were dubbed a more "civilized" section of it.

³MSA.PD.1885.Vol. 68. Comp 1139; see also Malcolm to Briggs, 10.3.1820, NAI.FD.23.11.1844.FC 116–47; MSA.PD.1885. Vol. 68, Comp 1139.

Similarly, the ways in which societies had transformed their physical environment was treated as emblematic of their relationship with the time of modernity. Many of the groups that came to be called tribes lived in forests or hills, seen as the “wild” portions of the land, away from the “civilization” associated with plains or riparian areas. Indeed, the association of forests with wildness was so strong that many colonial officials were to recommend that forests be cleared, that these communities be removed from forests as a way of civilizing them, or that they be introduced to “humanizing tendencies” of settled agriculture (Government of Bombay 1898).⁴

Also, nineteenth-century Europeans treated the absence or presence of literacy, and of a written script, as indicative of how advanced a society was, or what its relationship with the time of modernity was (Adas 1989; Skaria 1996). When the ethnologist Campbell inveighed against the suggestion of his predecessor that the Khonds were civilized, their lack of a script accounted for one of his fusillades: “The author of this report represented the Khonds as a refined people, overflowing with the most ingenious ideas. This was very much at variance with the notorious fact that they were without a written language” (Campbell 1864). Like the Khonds, most of the other communities eventually classified as primitives did not possess written scripts.

Furthermore, as Adam Kuper (1988, 3) has reminded us, “the study of primitive society . . . was treated initially as a branch of legal studies. Many of the key authors were lawyers, including Bachofen, Kohler, Maine, McLennan, and Morgan.” The existence of codified law, especially in written form, was one of the criteria by which societies could be ranked. By this measure, the Indian communities that were “tribes” fared very badly, for they depended almost entirely on what was classified as customary law. In contrast, many of the groups classified as “castes” had at least some written laws.

Menen provides a satirical account of how primitiveness was ascribed to the Limbodians. When the Political Agent, Catallus, visits a school, he asks the children to draw him a tiger. They make drawings that are “very neat, very literal . . . such as one might meet reproduced in a child’s alphabet book.” Catallus sees one, and is appalled at this “vulgar horror”:

“I said, ‘Is this how you *see* a tiger?’ and the boy said ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘But nonsense, boy, you can’t possibly *see* a tiger like that!’ and the boy answered me back, ‘But doesn’t it *look* like a tiger?’ Of course it did, of course, but the silly boy had missed the whole point of primitive art. No drawing done by a real primitive ever looks like the thing that he’s drawing. It mustn’t. That’s the whole basis of all that modern criticism which has done so much to show us the excellences of primitive art. And here was this slip of a boy saying ‘Doesn’t it look like a tiger?’ ”

So Catallus settles down to teach them how to do primitive art—“I am quite good at it, you know”—and succeeds. He surveys the resultant roomful of primitive art with pleasure: “Just think,” he ends, “one hour ago there was no primitive art in Limbo at all” (Menen 1989, 83ff., emphases original).

By the process of seizing upon and magnifying some differences, of imagining differences, an exhaustive list of the “tribes” of India had been prepared by the late nineteenth century. Needless to argue, the list was fundamentally arbitrary. This was so not simply in the sense that some groups like the Kolis were quite like the Bhils, but happened to be classified as castes rather than tribes because they took up settled

⁴NAI.FD.FC.8.8.1833. Nos 48–49.

agriculture in substantial numbers during the nineteenth century (Government of Bombay 1880; Government of Bombay 1901). Far more importantly, it was so in the sense that in almost all cases, the so-called tribes shared more cultural, social and economic practices with their caste neighbors in the region than with the other “tribes” all over India with whom British officials clubbed them. It is in this sense that one can really describe the colonial list of tribes as a process of primitivization, or of the invention of primitive societies.

Wildness and Masculinity

Colonial officials also often emphasized the nobility and independence of the wild tribes. In western India, they often stressed the rugged independence of the Bhils. The regions of Oghna and Mirpur in Rajputana were thus “inhabited by communities of the aboriginal races [Girasia Bhils] in a state of primaevial and almost savage independence,” owing no paramount power, paying no tribute, and living with “all the simplicity” of the “republics.” Oghna, in fact, was described as the “only spot” in India that still enjoyed a state of “natural freedom.”⁵ And in Dangs, one official remarked admiringly, the “idiosyncrasies” of the Bhils were opposed to those of civilized man “for whose society they care nought nor do they envy his condition. They honour the appellation of Bheels and are content to live on the scantiest fare and die as their Fathers have before them in their wild inhospitable mountain homes.”⁶

This sense of independence extended to individual Bhils. Their villages were

typical of themselves. Instead of the agglomeration of mud huts, each adjoining the other and crowded as closely as possible into a given space, which may be taken as a type of an ordinary Indian village, the Bhil’s hut stands alone, completely enclosed with a high-thorn fence. For choice it is perched on a hillock, and is surrounded by the fields which the owner cultivates. The nearest neighbour is probably 200 or 300 yards away, similarly detached or isolated, with bits of jungle intervening.

(Barnes 1907)

Similarly, their nobility was evident in their honesty and simplicity. The Dangs were described during a witch-killing trial as “that wild and yet simple and ignorant class . . . truthful to an incredible degree.”⁷ This was a central and regularly iterated article of imperial faith about most tribes. It was sometimes carried to remarkable lengths: in an 1877 judgment, the assertion that “it is difficult to imagine a real Dang Bhil coming into court with a story entirely fabricated” was one key premise on which the judgment was based.⁸ Such beliefs must have been sustained by a demanding combination of adroit footwork and selective blindness, since we come across several remarkably mendacious “tribals” in colonial records.

They were also very honorable men. A Bhil always kept his *bachan* or word. Then the Bhils were, like the tigers of the forests they inhabited, very brave. They had a “natural fearlessness” to them (Barnes 1907). Indeed, the “Bhil will himself attack a leopard and, with his friends, cut him to pieces” (Hendley 1875, 357). Besides, there

⁵Report by Captain Hunter on Bhils and Girasias, *NAI.FD.6.9.1841.F.C.* 33–35. Hunter was drawing on the imagery that James Tod had used before him.

⁶*MSA.PD.1858.Vol 95.Comp 734.*

⁷*MSA.PD.1876.Vol 108.Comp 1929.*

⁸*MSA.PD. 1877. Vol 106. Comp 500.*

was their loyalty. "Like other mountain tribes," the Bhils were "brave and trustworthy."⁹ The Bhils' fidelity to their "acknowledged chiefs" was "very remarkable": "so wonderful is the influence of the chief on this infatuated people that [in] . . . no situation however desperate can they be induced to betray [him]." They carried him to safe places if old or sick, and were "not affected by hope of reward or fear of punishment."¹⁰

What made for this celebration of the wild tribes? To some extent, doubtless, the old Enlightenment tradition of western thought about the noble savage. As Hayden White (1978, 191) has pointed out, for those who saw western society as a fall from natural perfection, the noble savage came to represent by the early eighteenth century a desirable antitype to social existence. With its implications of egalitarianism, the idea of the noble savage was part of the attack on the "European social system of privilege, inherited power, and political oppression." Liebersohn (1994) has persuasively developed the argument in an interesting new direction, suggesting that the European context of writing about the noble savage was transformed after the French Revolution. Europe itself seemed to be moving towards the equality that it had previously located in other societies and utopias. And educated or titled writers uneasy with this democratization perceived amongst indigenous peoples the "qualities of warrior valor, independence and honor that were in danger of disappearing within Europe."

But these explanations are not adequate in our context. The remarks about the Bhils were not made only by aristocratic travelers but by a wide cross-section of British officials; and the idea of the noble tribal was not a means of either criticizing differences within British society or celebrating qualities that were dying amongst the British. Perhaps we could take a different tack, and situate these attitudes in relation to gender ideologies involved in the way British officials represented the tribes, castes, and themselves. As has been pointed out by several scholars (McClintock 1995; in the South Asian context, see especially Sinha 1995 and Sangari and Vaid 1989), feminizing the colonized was crucial to colonialism both as a metaphor and as a constitutive dynamic. I do not so much wish to dissent from this understanding as to suggest that colonial domination could also be on the basis of the ascription to the colonized of particular forms of masculinity. That is to say, the feminization of the colonized was sometimes only metaphorical; there also existed British constructions of colonized masculinities that enabled and sustained imperial domination.

Consider the contrasts between British portrayals of castes and tribes. The castes were primarily seen as effeminate. It is true, of course, that some castes were seen as masculine. There were the "martial races"—groups like the Sikhs and Gurkhas, who formed potential recruits for the British army. Their masculinity was part of an orientalist discourse: it was a result of their singular qualities of honesty, loyalty, independence, lack of religious dogmatism, and sense of humor (Caplan 1991, 1995; Fox 1985). Then there were groups like the Kunbis or Patidars of Kheda in western India who were seen as yeoman farmers. Their masculinity derived from the discourses of agricultural improvement, which stressed the role of pioneer farmers in taming the agricultural frontier. But to the extent that groups like the Kunbis, Sikhs, or Gurkhas were seen as masculine, they were also seen as non-Hindu or outside mainstream Hinduism. And there is a strong case for maintaining that metaphors of femininity

⁹R. N. Hamilton to Secy., *GoI, NAI.FD.18.4.1845.F.C. 54–75.*

¹⁰Report by Captain Hunter on Bhils and Girasias, *NAI.FD.6.9.1841.F.C. 33–35.*

were normally used by the British to describe both Hinduism as a religion and Hindus as a people.

The nineteenth-century British historian Grant Duff, for example, said of the Marathas that “perfidy and want of principle are the strongest features in their character, and their successes have perhaps been less owing to their activity and courage than to their artifice and treachery” (Wink 1986, 5). And as for the Marathi Brahmins of the Peshwa’s regime, they were according to another British observer “an intriguing, lying, corrupt, licentious and unprincipled race of people, who are in no respect to be trusted, unless numerous checks are established to guard against their knavery and dishonesty.” Drawing on another slather of adjectives, Henry Pottinger described Brahmins in general as “the most unprincipled, dishonest, shameless and lying race in India” (Wink 1986, 11). It was through such portrayals that the ascription of effeminacy to the castes took place; these depictions had many parallels in contemporary portrayals of the feminine as the site of disorder. From the late nineteenth century, the feminization of castes was also one way of dismissing the emerging nationalist movement (Sinha 1995).

The gendering of the wild tribes contrasted sharply with this image. We can situate it within the context of Carole Pateman’s argument that European traditions around contract theory place the patriarchal family at the very origins of social life. “The antimony state of nature/civil society in the classic texts thus *presupposes* the sexual contract [the contract by which women enter into the subordination of marriage]. When the momentous move is made from the natural condition into civil society, marriage and the patriarchal family are carried over into the new civil order” (Pateman 1988, 110).

Perhaps the idea of the noble savage, closely linked to this complex of thought, was even more strongly gendered than this. Patriarchal domination might not just have been its hidden subtext. The social contract involved an agreement by which the savage gave up some of that excess of masculinity that made for conflict. To ascribe nobility to the savage was to hearken back to that presumed moment of unfettered masculinity after the sexual contract but before the social contract. And the conception of the “wild tribes,” derived as it was in crucial respects from ideas of the state of nature and the noble savage, was similarly gendered. It is within this context that honesty, loyalty, truthfulness, independence and warlike qualities were ascribed to wild tribes like the Bhils.

In some important respects, then, tribe in colonial understandings was to caste as male was to female. And because of a shared gender ascription, the tribes had in some ways more in common with the British than did the effeminate castes who were proximate to the British in the discourses of anachronism.

Women, of course, could not easily rule men. British gazetteers often claimed that precolonial relations between Bhils and the surrounding Maratha plains states had been one of unremitting hostility. As an administration report phrased this lavishly imagined tidbit of imperial common sense, the plains states had seen the Bhils as “outcasts from society and any measures for their extermination were considered justifiable.”¹¹ More generally, colonial officials believed that native states ruled by nontribal Indian princes could not make Bhils into good and peaceful subjects. Left to themselves, upper caste native officials, whether in princely states or

¹¹MSA.PD.1873.Vol 87.Comp 1551.

British territory, were prone to be cruel to the Bhils, to deceive them, or to resort to treachery.¹²

Viewed in the light of their masculinity, the nobility ascribed to Bhils (or even martial races like Sikhs or Gurkhas) makes more sense. Discussing the colonial portrayal of Gurkhas, Lionel Caplan (1991, 591) points to how like public school boys Gurkhas appear in these portrayals. Certainly, the Bhils too had points of similarity with public school boys. If one adds to their other sterling qualities the fact that they loved sports, and that because of their splendid sense of humor, they could “laugh better than most Indians” (Barnes 1907, 327) the remarkable versimilitude becomes more evident.

All this is very suggestive. The public school boy was a key figure in imperial ideology. He was the precursor and parent of the gentleman. Public schools were even, as Philip Mason calls them in his jingoistic essay, “factories for gentlemen” (Mason 1993). And gentlemanliness was the very stuff from which self-legitimizing imperial ideologies were fashioned (Girouard 1981). If the British were more fit to rule half the globe than other European powers, then this was because they and their leaders were noble gentlemen, because they loved liberty, and because, as Mason remarks ingenuously and in all seriousness:

They used power with some restraint, and as a rule with courtesy and with generosity. They thought of the public good with some degree of detachment. They admired courage and honesty and truthfulness. . . . For my part, since I must be ruled by someone, I had rather that it was by men who acknowledged such standards, and who tried to rule themselves and others with dignity and good temper. And it was no bad thing that in the time of England’s greatness her ruling class did aim at such a pattern.

(Mason 1993, 226)

In British accounts, it took the nobility, mildness, sagacity, and inbred gentlemanliness of colonial officials to subdue the Bhils. Their subjugation was associated most often with James Outram, the “Bayard of India,” and the way in which it occurred was amongst the most frequently detailed colonial myths. One account of it was provided by Russell and Hira Lal (1916, vol. 2:284ff.):

The reclamation and pacification of the Bhils is inseparably associated with the name of Lieutenant, afterwards Sir James, Outram. The Khandesh Bhil Corps was first raised by him in 1825. . . . Indulging the wild men with feasts and entertainments, and delighting them with his matchless urbanity, Captain Outram at length contrived to draw over to the cause nine recruits, one of whom was a notorious plunderer who had a short time before successfully robbed the officer commanding a detachment sent against him. This infant corps soon became strongly attached to the person of their new chief and entirely devoted to his wishes; their goodwill had been won by his kind and conciliatory manners, while their admiration and respect had been thoroughly roused and excited by his prowess and valour in the chase. On one occasion, it is recorded, word was brought to Outram of the presence of a panther in some prickly-pear shrubs on the side of a hill near his station. He went to shoot it with a friend, Outram being on foot and his friend on horseback searching through the bushes. When close on the animal, Outram’s friend fired and missed, on which the panther sprang forward roaring and seized Outram, and they rolled down the hill

¹²For fairly typical examples, see *NAI.FD.21.11.1846.FC* 66–88; *NAI.FD.18.4.1845.FC* 54–75.

together. Being released from the claws of the furious beast for a moment, Outram with great presence of mind drew a pistol which he had with him, and shot the panther dead. The Bhils, on seeing that he had been injured, were one and all loud in their grief and expressions of regret, when Outram quieted them with the remark, "What do I care for the clawing of a cat?" and this saying long remained a proverb among the Bhils. By his kindness and sympathy, listening freely to all that each single man in the corps had to say to him, Outram at length won their confidence, convinced them of his good faith and dissipated their fears of treachery. Soon the ranks of the corps became full, and for every vacant place there were numbers of applicants. The Bhils freely hunted down and captured their friends and relations who continued to create disturbances, and brought them in for punishment. . . . With the assistance of the corps the marauding tendencies of the hill Bhils were suppressed and tranquillity restored to Khandesh, which rapidly became one of the most fertile parts of India.

Outram also provided the model in later decades for the kind of British officer who was needed to deal with the Bhils. He had to be somebody fond of sport, hunting, and the outdoor life (Lee-Warner, 1907); that is to say, he had to be a "gentleman."¹³ One official, Fenner, after remarking on the Bhils' low intelligence, remarked that he admired "their unbounded confidence in European Gentlemen, whose character they think they understand."¹⁴ It was because of British gentlemanliness that they "deserved and won . . . [Bhil] confidence" (Lee-Warner 1907, 338), that the Bhils had "reverence" and "affection" for the British.

Of course, unlike the English public school boy, the Bhil or tribal did not ever quite grow up. His distance from English gentlemen was basically because of his primitiveness. It was also manifest in his inability to hold his liquor, his proclivity to quarrel and carry on feuds, his impulsiveness, and his thriftlessness and aversion to work (Barnes 1907). As a result, he never became fit for self-rule, or for rule over others. Neither, for that matter, did the Gurkhas. Primitiveness in one case, and the absence of some singular qualities in the other—these were natural and insurmountable barriers in the way of Bhils or Gurkhas becoming gentlemen, or equals of the British (Caplan 1991).

Because of this immaturity, many British officials felt that they had a mission to protect the Bhils and other wild tribes against others. British rule in India was always, of course, represented as paternalistic. But with a people so strongly perceived as backward, childlike, and noble, colonial paternalism somersaulted into its own with a flourish. Describing a tribal area, Panchmahals in eastern Gujarat, a senior official, Ewan Maconochie, reminisced: "such was the domain in which Raja Propert [W. H. Propert, a mid-nineteenth-century district Collector whom Maconochie had met] hunted his tigers, spanked his wild children with paternal hand and ruled with untrammelled authority" (Maconochie 1926, 36).

Paternalistic protection was needed because simple, straightforward men like the wild tribes were lamentably prone to being deceived by plains merchants and traders, as well as by plains powers like the Gaekwads or the Rajput states. Colonial officials also believed that contact with the castes of the plains had a corrupting influence on the wild tribes. One judge observed during the trial of a Bhil: "by nature he is an ignorant Bheel but a long residence in jail [in the plains] has sharpened his wits and

¹³Shakespear to Secretary, Government of India, 23.7.1860, *NAI.FD.Pol A.April 1862.Nos 118–22*.

¹⁴*MSA.PD.1858.Vo195.Comp 734*.

he now argues with the court . . . [like] a Vakil of the lowest class."¹⁵ Similarly, in the Bhil Corps, formerly "the Bhil, when he was questioned, always spoke the truth . . . But, unfortunately, he had learned to lie with the advent of Brahman native officers who had taught him the drill" (Barnes 1907, 339).

Protection was needed not only against others: the Bhils also had to be protected from their own more deplorable traits. Outram, for example, "managed to check their propensity for liquor by paying them every day just sufficient for their food, and giving them the balance of their pay at the end of the month, when some might have a drinking bout, but many preferred to spend the money on ornaments and articles of finery" (Russell and Hira Lal 1916, vol. 2:284). Then there were their recidivist impulses—those "plundering propensities" which might spring to the fore if inadequately supervised.¹⁶

In "The Tomb of his Ancestors," a story Rudyard Kipling published in 1898, the main protagonist John Chinn, a British official, remarks of the Bhils to his colonel: "There isn't an ounce of real vice in them." What was needed, of course, was good supervision to keep their high spirits in check. And Chinn (modelled, it is speculated sometimes, on Outram), who like his father and grandfather before him provided just that, was treated as a demigod by "his own people," the Bhils of the Satpura range. Justifiably so, for they knew it was he "who had made the Bhil a man." Man to the Bhils and the plains Hindus, maybe, but not to the British. As Chinn reassures his Bhil attendant, "The Bhils are my children" (Kipling 1964, 99, 105). Kipling's fantasy set responsive chords jangling amongst colonial officials: Maconochie (1926, 26), for example, urged the British schoolboys to whom he dedicated his book to read the story.

Perennial boys, and likeable ones at that, the Bhils and the wild tribes made ideal subjects. And the affection of such subjects affirmed British imperial masculinity and nobility. It was, so to speak, a man-to-man recognition . . . or should one say a boy-to-man recognition? The nobility of the Bhils provided British officials a means of thinking about themselves, of locating the essence of British imperial identity. It was a way of thinking about the courage, truthfulness, honesty, and rugged simplicity that was the essence of being British back home, and even more so in the colonies.

All this is very well. What, however, of Bhil women? As we know, the opposite of the savage man in evolutionist thought was the savage woman, with her wild sexuality (Gilman 1985; Stocking 1987, 202; Tiffany and Adams 1985). This image was sometimes drawn on. In a case where a Dangi male was accused of having raped an eleven-year-old girl, the Political Agent did not find the rapist guilty. He concluded, despite much evidence to the contrary, that while it seemed unlikely that the girl had consented, "the moral perceptions and sensibilities of the class to which she belongs have been displayed in such colours" that it was not possible to convict the accused rapist without "distinct proof" of violence.¹⁷

But what is striking on the whole is that this emphasis on the unbridled sexuality of the Bhil woman remained muted in the nineteenth century. Why? In all likelihood, because the primary emphasis was on the exotic sexuality of the oriental woman, epitomized in South Asia by the castes. Thus there was the colonial fascination with *sati*, the practice of widow immolation amongst the upper castes. This fascination was

¹⁵MSA.PD.1876.Vol 108.Comp 1325.

¹⁶Lt Hutchinson to Agent to the Governor General, Indore, 12.5.1856, NAI.FD.Pol.1856.Nos 31-45.

¹⁷MSA.PD.1847.Vol 21.Comp 162.

to a large extent “voyeuristic,” stemming from the fact that *sati* enacted the “powerful male fantasy of female devotion” (Loomba 1993, 211; Mani 1991). Because of this primary focus on exotic, orientalist sexuality, the primitive sexuality of the tribal woman was, with some important exceptions (as for example in the tea plantations of northeast India), not much dwelt on.

And maybe the public school affinities of the Bhil man rather than his savagery influenced portrayals of Bhil family life and Bhil women. Like the respectable Englishman, the Bhil man was thought to value the family. As early as 1825, Sir John Malcolm reported: “the Bhil women have better habits than the men; but, in justice to the latter, I must say, that I have seen singular instances of affection, and attachment to their families” (Malcolm 1825, 90). By the late nineteenth century, the qualifying clauses had been tucked out of sight. In *The Wild Tribes of India*, H. B. Rowney (S. C. Dutt?) remarked: “Among the redeeming features of the Bheel character are: great attachment for home and family, [and] kindness towards women. . .” (1882, 37).

In the roles that colonial officials ascribed to Bhil women, there could be heard the distant rumble of ideas about respectable Victorian femininity, adapted to the exigencies of the fact that the Bhils were not bourgeois urban folk but noble savages—and a rather impulsive, bibulous, and quarrelsome edition of that stock. Given the fact that savages of this sort did not make good oaks, the Bhil woman could hardly be the supportive vine that a Victorian woman was. Rather, she strengthened the noble Bhil, tempering his unruly spirits when appropriate, and being a responsible helpmate at other times. “Among the Bhils the women are generally more intelligent, and have a far greater fund of common sense, than the men . . . It is they who urge moderation on their lords and intervene, often successfully, in quarrels arising out of liquor” (Barnes 1907, 327).

Wildness and Violence

We can now return to the question of why so many British officials found it difficult to sentence wild tribes for witch killings or other similar violence. In terms of the politics of both time and gender, they saw the violence of the “tribes” as very different from similar acts of violence by caste groups. In the discourses of anachronism, the latter were less wild than the tribes. Perhaps colonial officials saw their violence as *barbaric*, a word often (though not exclusively) used to refer to societies which had reached a certain stage of civilization and then fallen back (Adas 1989, 195). Such violence was all the more inexcusable because it was a spectacular transgression of the civilization that the castes possessed. To add to matters, the castes were wild in the sense of being effeminate; their violence was profoundly feminine and dishonorable. Such violence could not be tolerated.

Contrast this with Dangi crimes. Primitives were outside civilization or, more precisely, before civilization. Their acts were therefore not barbaric but *savage*—a consequence of their being before civilization (Meek 1976, 33). The tone was set in the very first case of witch killing tried from Dangs, where the judge remarked that allowance must be made for the “particular superstitions” about witchcraft, and the “general moral degradation” of the Dangis.¹⁸ In another case in Khandesh (tried,

¹⁸MSA.PD.1847.Vol 21/1902.Comp 783.

incidentally, by “Raja Propert”) it was remarked that “were the accused persons civilized they would morally deserve the punishment of death.” As it was, colonial judges kept remarking, the Dangis saw what they had done as a “laudable act.”¹⁹ If lack of civilization played here an exculpatory role (an argument with resonances in British legal tradition of the diminished responsibility of those who were mentally ill or retarded), colonial reluctance to pass stiff sentences was also influenced by the ascription of a childlike masculinity to Bhils. As Maconochie (1926, 74ff.) wrote, “It is difficult to be hard on children of this sort.” He went on: “a distinguished officer admitted to me that on one occasion, after he had convicted a fine young Bhil of some act of depredation, he was so much overcome by his feelings that he tore up the records, squared the police, and let the man go.” Boys, after all, will be boys, and it was not done to be too stern with them.

Of course, the celebration of wildness should not be read to indicate that colonial officials exercised some kind of benevolently paternal rule over the tribes. Far from it. When Bhils rebelled against colonial power, officials were not as prone to being overcome by their feelings as they were when Bhil women were the targets. When Bhils violated colonial forest laws, British penalties were draconian and brutal, to say the least. Also, as I have argued at length in my book, the ascription of wildness to the tribes was part of the effort to civilize them. The civilizing mission involved subordinating the tribes, making them take to settled cultivation while keeping them apart from castes; it involved separating the wild forests and wild tribes. It is in this context of subordination that colonial celebrations of wild tribes have to be placed. British mastery of tribes not only affirmed colonial masculinity; it showed equally the appropriateness of colonial mastery over the effeminate castes.

Yet, in colonial understandings, with a wild people like the Bhils, mastery was never complete, not even after they had been protected and transformed. They could be instigated by mischief-makers, and they had this habit of breaking into revolt at the drop of a pin. In some senses, true, British officials felt that there was something exasperatingly endearing about the impossibility of mastery over the wild tribes. Their proclivity to rebel was not because they were devious or deceitful; it was because of their natural and irrepressible boisterousness. Of one revolt, an official remarked that it was “a regular case of naughty boys making a disturbance in the school-room when they believed the school-master’s attention was momentarily diverted.”²⁰

But revolts also dangerously foregrounded the limits of mastery and of colonial stereotypes about wild tribes. To conceive of genuine rather than misplaced hostility from the masculine wild tribes undermined British notions of themselves, their masculinity, their gentlemanliness, and their civilizing mission far too radically; it threatened to show up the awfulness and raw domination of colonialism. To conceive of Bhil hostility as no different from plains hostility was to allow that the tribes’ wildness too might be like that of the feminine castes, that there was no site anywhere in the colonies for the affirmation of imperial masculinity—all deeply troubling thoughts. As such, revolts had to be suppressed brutally, and then forgotten or recast as boisterousness. This may be why, despite the fact that the Bhils possibly revolted more often than any other community in India, colonial officials clutched desperately, almost touchingly, to the idea that Bhils were especially loyal subjects, more so than

¹⁹MSA.PD.1876.Vol. 108.Comp 1929; MSA.PD.1884.Vol. 89.Comp 686; MSA.PD.1859.Vol. 92.Comp 581, see also MSA.PD.1876.Vol 108.Comp 1929.

²⁰Annual report, 1914–15, MSA.ED.1916.Comp 739.

any others. In this sense, British celebrations of the nobility and masculinity of the wild tribes was always marked by a pervasive anxiety (Skaria forthcoming, chap. 13).

Postcolonial Transpositions

All of this leads on to one more question. After independence, the whole question of how witch killers and other “tribal” offenders should be treated became much less charged, often disappearing entirely from view. Why should this have been the case? Perhaps it was symptomatic of a refiguring of the differences between tribes and castes, and of a transformation of the politics of time and gender involved in wildness. The practices of colonial rule made the distinction between tribes and castes real, and profoundly transformed the relationship between them. It was this transformed relationship that Indian nationalist thinkers—often upper caste men—engaged with in the light of their own concerns. What tended to be emphasized was the unity of the nation, and the constructedness of categories such as tribe or caste. Already by 1890 one Gujarati book explained the term *kaliparaj* by observing:

Those whom today’s reformed and educated persons know as *kaliparaj* or *pahadi* did not give themselves that name. But educated persons have described and thought of them as *pahadi* or *kaliparaj* because of their black [*kali*] complexion and their residence in hilly [*pahadi*] areas. In their own [*kaliparaj*] understanding, the words *pahadi* or *kaliparaj* are not there at all. Rather, they describe themselves by reference to the many *jati* [castes/communities] names amongst them.

(Pathan and Uphadyaya 1890, 1)

Increasingly, terms like *kaliparaj* or *janglijati* (wild castes) were considered derogatory, and were questioned. A consequence of this was the replacement, in the early twentieth century, of the word *kaliparaj* by the word *raniparaj*, or people of the wilderness. The Gandhian Sumant Mehta recalled in the journal *Samajdharma* how this had come about:

When I was studying in England, I sometimes had occasion to go to the villages, and the village boys on seeing me would call out “nigger” and “blackie.” I remembered this fact. I certainly do not like those words. That afternoon in Mahuva [in Surat district, in the winter of 1924] under the shade of a tree, a large meeting was held. Hundreds of people walked ten to fifteen miles to come to the meeting. They had great enthusiasm within them, but, oppressed for centuries, they did not have the courage to express their enthusiasm. At this meeting of two to three thousand people, I announced for the first time that from now onwards we would use the word the word *raniparaj* only instead of *kaliparaj*, and I told them how I was called a *kalio* [blackie] abroad.

(Quoted in Desai 1971, 5)

An apparently nonderogatory word for such groups that emerged in the 1930s was *adivasi*, literally “inhabitant from the earliest times” or autochthons. It originated in the Chotanagpur region of Bihar in the 1930s, and was popularized on a national level by the Gandhian A. V. Thakkar, who worked amongst the “tribes” of western India (Hardiman 1987, 13). By now, it has emerged as the most popular of the words used to describe these communities, employed both by themselves and by non-*adivasi*s.

But the unity that nationalists envisaged was of a particular kind, where castes were decidedly superior. Despite abandoning derogatory terms, Indian nationalist

leaders and elites made a distinction between the wild and the civilized very similar to that made by most British officials. As a result, the idea that *adivasis* or groups like the Bhils were primitive became deeply entrenched in the perceptions of dominant Indian groups. An ethnography of the *kaliparaj* of the Gaekwadi district of Navsari in western India emphatically reiterated most of the colonial criteria which distinguished tribes from castes (Patel 1901). So, as far as the politics of time went, protonationalist and nationalist understandings colluded with the colonial discourse of anachronism, developing if anything a much stronger emphasis on how advanced the castes were relative to the tribes.

But the politics of time was and is intertwined with and inseparable from that of gender, and this politics was so different that the kind of sympathy that colonial officials had for Bhil men accused of witch killing no longer came easily. In an important and highly insightful article, Kaushik Ghosh (n.d.) has explored the theme of primitivism in Bengali modernity, focusing specifically on how Kol societies were imagined by the Bengali middle class. Pointing out that Bengali nationalism internalized the colonial characterization of Indians as effete, he suggests, first, that the ascription of masculinity to Kol society was part of an attempt to recover masculinity for the middle class. Second, he suggests that the sexual objectification of Kol women was especially significant since it occurred at a time when nationalist discourse was constructing Bengali womanhood in a language that erased her sexuality, and cast her basically as an embodiment of motherhood and sacrifice.

These two attitudes—*adivasi* society as highly male, and *adivasi* women as highly sexual and erotic figures—were in all likelihood common to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Indian middle-class attitudes towards tribes. Both were different from colonial ascriptions. Colonial officials harped on shared masculinity; middle-class discourse dwelt on the need to become masculine, somewhat (though not quite) like the tribes. Colonial officials often cast savage women not as wildly sexual beings but as responsible and stabilizing figures in the family; middle-class writers, in contrast, reserved these qualities for middle-class women, denied the sexuality of upper- or middle-caste women, and displaced that ascription of sexuality onto the “tribal woman.” Thus it is that in nationalist accounts and postindependence ethnographies there is a far greater and more consistent emphasis on the “sexual freedom” of *adivasi* society and the sexuality of *adivasi* women than in colonial accounts!²¹

The emphasis on the sexuality of *adivasi* women continues today. But the ascription of the masculinity to *adivasi* society, it seems to me, was a more complex and tenuous affair. Late Indian nationalism often denied masculinity to *adivasi* societies, or at least marginalized the implications of such masculinity. The nationalist movement was, in ways that have been demonstrated over and again by scholars, a claim for the masculinity of the Indian people, and especially of the Indian middle classes and upper castes. What made the Indian middle classes and upper castes especially masculine, in this representation, was their claim to control the project of modernization. Modernity, rather than a splotchy palette of truthfulness, loyalty, bravery, and primitiveness came to be the central defining parameter of masculinity.

In a sense, *all* the protagonists in the famous 1940s debate—where important figures like Ghurye, Elwin, and Thakkar discussed the policies to be adopted towards

²¹For critical remarks on this “sexual freedom,” see Unnithan-Kumar (1991). It is a striking coincidence that Verrier Elwin, one of the figures who focused most insistently on the sexuality of the tribal woman, should, despite being British, also have been one of the most fervent supporters of Indian nationalism.

tribals in independent India—accepted this equation of modernity and masculinity. Persons like Elwin felt that *adivasis* needed to be protected. However, in a departure from dominant British understandings, this protection was not sought for an endangered masculinity threatened by effeminate castes; rather, it was for a fragile *adivasi* culture—metaphorically feminine, and only about a marginal masculinity at best—which could not survive the onslaught of the masculine modernity of the Indian nation (Elwin 1943). And those like Ghurye (who accused Elwin of wanting to preserve *adivasis* as though they were in a zoo) argued for the assimilation of *adivasis* into the Indian mainstream. If they were marginalized in the process and incapable of coping with modernity, those like Ghurye seemed to argue, then so be it (Ghurye 1943). In some ways, one might say, Ghurye’s point of view won out. Though a category called “Scheduled Tribes” was created, membership to it was determined by a government schedule; since at least the 1960s, the emphasis has been on assimilating the *adivasis* and ensuring that they become more “developed.” The wildness of the tribal, both as primitive and as an effeminate being, epitomized Indian backwardness; this backwardness had to be overcome and extirpated for the nation to become modern, or simply for the nation to become. From this kind of perspective, there was much less scope than formerly for the kind of reluctance that British officials had felt for passing tough sentences on the wild tribes.

And Now

Ironically, it is now those of us who criticize the Indian nation-state’s violence against *adivasis* who have often adopted and affirmed a melange of those colonial and nationalist tropes that celebrate the tribes. Consider one of the staples of radical chic in India: Varli painting. These paintings have come to be synonymous with *adivasi* art, and reproductions adorn many living rooms. Surely their ubiquity has something to do with the nature of Varli art, which (unlike the Limbodian vulgar horrors) with their many stick drawings slip neatly into our preconceptions of what primitive art is supposed to be like.

Or consider the emergence in the last two decades of what might be called the alternative savage. Increasingly, popular radical discourse has celebrated the presumed environmental friendliness and sustainability of *adivasi* lifestyles. Like other indigenous peoples (often, unfortunately, simply a new word for tribes), they have come to be seen as embodying an alternative to modernity. Here, the ascription to *adivasi* cultures of a metaphorical femininity (or of a particular kind of fragile masculinity threatened by modernity) is carried further. Only, the valences are now transposed. The masculinity of the modern world is no longer desirable but anathema; feminine systems, or formerly marginal masculinities, seem to offer an alternative. And the fact that *adivasi* cultures are daubed with the brush of femininity, or are stereotypically portrayed as at least outside a male modernity, makes them appear to provide a sustainable alternative to discredited models of development.

I am, of course, sympathetic to much of the politics accompanying the image of the alternative savage, and certainly we do need to fight the violence of modern South Asian nation-states against *adivasis*. But surely we also need to pay attention to the weapons and images we fight with. We need to recognize that we are often being complicitous with a masculinist colonial discourse, that we are primitivizing and essentializing *adivasis* in an attempt to think through some of our real problems with

postcolonial modernity. And however laudable and admirable our politics, there is a profound disrespect and violence involved in these strategies.

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