



Abstract

This PhD research builds on previous experience of working in policy reformulation concerning the issue of “regional backwardness” in India. That endeavour involved developing improved indicators to define “backward regions” and to identify these regions for state support. Primarily a quantitative assessment, it relied on using Census 2011 and focused on sub-districts, revealing previously unknown patterns of intra-district disparity. The development polarisation evident through this exercise raised questions about characterizing a district, let alone region or state as a whole, as “developed” or “backward”. Furthermore, it also revealed that “regional backwardness” was increasingly concentrated in adivasi enclaves across the country.

The current PhD research transcends this early work and moves beyond a mere statistical preoccupation with the differential distribution of development indicators. Instead, it focuses on qualitative processes and regions that are at the locus of these processes. Moving from where the backward regions are, who are the people who live there, and what distinct socio-ecological characteristics they have, this thesis investigates what processes characterizes and connects the dynamics of these regions with the rest of India. Is the instance of development polarization and persistent adivasi marginalisation a bizarre statistical anomaly or could it be hypothesized that there might be a perfectly consistent, qualitative, processual explanation for the integrity of these facts? If regional backwardness in India is a moving frontier with the most intense form of poverty increasingly concentrated within enclaves inhabited by the adivasi communities, the most important research concern was to find an explanation for adivasi enclavement and the apparent paradoxes evident in large parts of the country. In such a context, the thesis set out to explore the following research question.

What explains the persistent adivasi marginalisation and their enclavement in large parts of the country? A question that is examined empirically in rural southern Odisha , namely in districts of Koraput and Ganjam.

In understanding development polarization and adivasi marginalisation, the thesis adopts a conceptual framework that combines insights from critical human geography, agrarian political economy, along with the work of sociologists dedicated to the study of adivasi marginalisation in India. To further enhance this analytical approach, it is anchored within a framework of Marxian dialectics. This positioning supports a nuanced comprehension of socio-spatial processes that configure a given region, away from a causal, deterministic, and ahistorical interpretations towards a processual, contingent, and a dynamic perspective. It proposes a conceptual framework that captures the overarching processes underlying the socio-political and economic change in the polarized regions inhabited by the adivasis, and attends to ways in which it interacts with the specifically situated regional historical conditions. By adopting such an integrated framework, the thesis intends to overcome some of the conventional analytical limitations in studies on adivasi marginalisation, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dynamics shaping adivasi marginalisation.

For exploring these dialectical processes shaping polarized adivasi geographies, I explore three distinct yet interconnected themes, spanning: 1) relational identities of “backward” adivasi territories; 2) structural factors and survival strategies adopted by the adivasis; and 3) contingent relations and spaces of contestation, including how adivasi politicization encounters opposition.

The first theme is explored in Chapter 3 and 4 and offers a nuanced explanation of the historical processes that have led to the construction of a “backward” adivasi region and “backward” adivasi identity. Employing a reverse anthropology approach, the thesis examines the state-making endeavours in the pre-colonial and colonial past that positioned these regions and its people in specific ways, and which continues to hold salience even today.

The second theme, explored in Chapter 5, delves into a deeper materialist explanation behind adivasis marginalisation and development polarization. Here too the role of the colonial state in restricting access to critical resources is contextualized for southern Odisha. Specifically, it sheds light on the routine practices of territorialization fashioned through land survey, settlement, mapping and scheduling, which reconfigured adivasis relationship to land and forest. Furthermore, it examines the more contemporary attempts at redressing past injustices, emphasising the need for acknowledging historical wrongs in state territorialization projects and advocating for democratizing land governance processes at the grassroots level.

Thirdly, having outlined the different ways in which land access and control has been denied to the adivasis, the thesis shifts its focus to understanding their contemporary survival strategies. This thematic exploration is highlighted in Chapter 6 for Koraput and Chapter 7 for Ganjam. The thesis empirically investigates the fragile livelihoods of adivasis through household surveys conducted in 6 villages (3 each in the two districts) across diverse agro-ecological zones. The research reveals several key points. Firstly, despite the adivasi claim of being original inhabitants, there are significant disparities in land distribution between Kondh adivasis and non-adivasis in Koraput. Secondly, attempt to overcome these initial resource disparities through land lease markets, often supplemented by non-farm income in nearby towns, are influenced by caste relations. Thirdly, socio economic positions of adivasis and dalits are differentiated in Koraput due to historical processes and contemporary political economy factors, which have implications for joint political mobilization against the upper castes. Fourthly, agrarian differentiation is shaped by the non-adoption of chemical farming by adivasi farmers in the uplands and forested areas of Koraput.

However, Ganjam, presents a contrasting scenario where firstly, the Sora adivasi communities exhibit an enclave like characteristic, with their spatial distribution closely aligned with the hilly and forested ecological features of the area. This enclavment, far from being romanticised ecologically, is a result of a protracted process of land expropriation that goes back to the entry of non-adivasi outsiders patronized by the British. Secondly, local histories indicate that historical exploitative relations persist even today, as non-adivasi landlords and traders continue to exploit local markets to extract adivasi labour and produce at cheap prices. Thirdly, adivasis farmers in the uplands face numerous pressures, including threats to life and livelihoods due to recurring cyclones in the area. Additionally, there are serious constraints to livelihoods opportunities, compounded by severe rainfed conditions. As families grow and farm sizes becoming small, there is very little lands available in the uplands. This has led to many adivasis becoming circular migrants to distant locales. And this has also encouraged local NGOs and government agencies to push for Soras relocation from uplands to more accessible areas, which has put them at an even greater risk of being deprived of basic sustenance security. Moreover, this may further push them into full time wage work, which is already quite exploitative in the region.

Chapter 8 of the thesis examines the ways in adivasis contest their marginalisation, and the opposition they encounter in the process.

Lastly, Chapter 9 of the thesis serves as concluding chapter that brings together the main findings of the research. It also offers reflections on possible analytical and empirical contributions made by the thesis, with a brief discussion on policy implications emerging from this research.