Normative Implications of Social Movement Theories for Adivasi (original dweller) Social Movements, Popular Education/Praxis and Social Change in India.

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Introduction

In charting a learning society, critical adult/popular educators remain committed to addressing the concerns and challenges about the value, meaning and agenda of adult education as social education, in relation to marginalized and disenfranchised citizens. Keeping with the historical roots of adult education, popular educators continue to chart and acknowledge the importance of social movements, both, in terms of their learning and social change potential (Allman, 1999; Dykstra & Law, 1994; Holford, 1995; Holst, 2002; Welton, 1997).

Given the need for continued and further investigation into the relationship between social movements and adult education in civil society (Cunningham, 2000), this paper provides a critical analysis of the normative and praxiological implications of specific theoretical representations of social movements and Adivasi social movements, including: (a) Gandhian-environmentalist representations; (b) New social movement (NSM) representations; and (c) Gramscian conceptions of social movements, in relation to the political, ecological and cosmological/spiritual dimensions of Kondh Adivasi existence rationality, based on an understanding developed through my decade long association with these and other Adivasi groups in the state of Orissa, India as an action/participatory researcher, popular educator and NGO actor for social change. It is hoped that such critical-theoretical engagement will assist with the process of making the politics of Adivasi social movements and the purpose and nature of such movements more intelligible, subsequently making it possible to suggest a plausible role/purpose for popular education/praxis in these movements for social change.

Adivasis and Development in India

There are over 60 million or 427 Constitutionally recognized scheduled tribes (Article 342) in India. With a history that dates their presence on the landmass now referred to as India to well over 4000 years, these pre-Dravidian peoples are variously concentrated in different parts of the country. The term indigenous is hard to define in the Indian context, unlike in its original context of the Americas where, historically, there has been a sharper differentiation between "natives" and European settlers. The use of tribe as an alternative is also problematic because of the porosity of the boundary between "caste" and "tribe", both of which have existed side-by-side for centuries in India. I shall use the widely used Indian term, "Adivasi" or "original dweller", to refer to these social groups.

For centuries, vital natural resources like land, water and forests had been controlled and used collectively by Adivasi and village communities, largely enabling a sustainable use of these renewable resources. A major change in the utilization of natural resources of India was introduced by the British, when the ever increasing resource demands of the industrial revolution in England was largely met from colonies like India; a process that saw the transformation of
commons into commodities. With the eventual collapse of the international colonial structure and the establishment of sovereign countries in the region, resource use policies continued along colonial lines to meet the demands of the Indian elite. The Gandhian project of reviving the village economy as the basis for development was largely ignored, as Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, took the country down the path to industrialization and modernization.

Despite Nehru's assurances that tribal right to land and forests should be respected, a complex scheme of land classification has essentially led to the detribalization of tribal forests and land, as Adivasi rights to the forest have been reduced to grudging concessions granted by the state or outright denial of tenure or access (Gadgil & Guha, 1995). 97% of mining activities take place on Adivasi land/forests; Adivasi reliance on the forests has been threatened as forest cover has declined from 40% in 1854 to under 8% in the 1990s; the infamous Narmada Dam project in western India has necessitated the displacement of 2 million people, the majority of whom are Bhilala and other Adivasi groups, while according to one estimate, some 15.5 million people have been displaced by development projects since independence, while 75% (including Adivasis) of them have yet to be rehabilitated (Fernandes & Thukral, 1989). The rise of Adivasi social movements in the post-independence period needs to be understood in terms of these incursions, as Adivasis have had to bear the brunt of destructive development.

Theoretical representations of Adivasis and social movements: Normative implications for popular education/praxis in Adivasi social movements for social change

Gandhian-Environmentalist representations: Shiva (1989, p.47) suggests that subsistence producers like the Adivasis, "have the holistic and ecological knowledge of what the production and protection of what life is all about." The aranya sanskriti (forest culture) of adivasis exemplify the "life enhancing paradigm" (as opposed to the modern "life-destroying paradigm"), where "renew ability is the primary management objective" (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1990, p.74). These scholars postulate that indigenous culture and resistance is a comprehensive critique of development based on the traditional Adivasi way of life, distinguished by its reverence for nature and Gandhian-like simplicity -- values that challenge the dominant world view's desire for mastery over nature and material wealth. When they claim that the practices of Adivasis exemplify the life-enhancing paradigm that has survived over centuries because Adivasis have learnt to be like the forest, sustaining both the forest and the culture through time, they attribute to Adivasis an environmental consciousness which is said to be ingrained in their traditional wisdom.

According to Guha (1988, pp.83-84), such "representations of Adivasis" (scholars trying to demonstrate that the critique of development actually exists in the lives of Adivasis "with a perfect and immaculate consciousness") derive from a scholarly political agenda of setting up an ideological counterpoint to development. But however noble the cause, such appropriation by radical scholars ends up creating caricatures and popular educators engaged in environmental activism need to recognize some of the pitfalls of such "strategic" caricaturizations.

First, while there is ample evidence to suggest that Adivasi/Kondh lifestyles do leave the smallest "ecological footprint" (Sachs, 1997) relative to modern industrial societies, caricatures/immaculate environmental representations tend to iron out or gloss over and leave unaddressed imperfections in Adivasi resource use patterns in order to "fit the Adivasi into the life-enhancing paradigm" in the interests of building the case for resisting the ideology of development (Baviskar, 1995, p.241). While recognizing the "victimization" of Adivasis by state-led development and power, i.e., unsustainability is not inherent in Adivasi practices but obtains...
from their history of political and economic domination, it should still be possible to address the destructive environmental practices of Adivasis under duress, with the view to do what is possible to stem environmental destruction. If popular educators fail to engage in such critique, Adivasis will unwittingly become a part of the same process that is eroding the spiritual and material basis for their existence (Kapoor, 2000).

For instance, popular educators tend to "underplay" the environmental consequences of swidden/shifting cultivation. People are practicing shifting cultivation, using already degraded forest, cultivating friable hill soils on which sustainable production could potentially be obtained and are understandably not risking money and effort into the considerable enterprise of bunding, aorestation or field leveling because they face the constant dread of random eviction. The end result of these practices is continuing soil erosion and deforestation. While critical action to deal with this contradiction has to address the structural causes (such as pressuring the state to grant land tenure etc.), local initiatives using community resources and the resources of "outsiders" must also be marshaled to protect the environment.

Second, when advocates for a radical socio-environmental democracy engage in such "strategic caricaturizations", they unwittingly end up "objectifying the Adivasi" and contradict their espoused axiological commitments to valuing the agency of marginalized groups that they claim have been "objectified by development". Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the eloquent championing of Adivasi resistance "tends to obscure the some of the difficulties that Adivasis encounter in their attempt at resistance such as a tendency to underestimate the power of the brakes put on resistance by the circumstances of domination" (for example, state responses to open democratic resistance by marginalized groups) (Baviskar, 1995, p.239). The burden of social change, activism and ecological preservation are foisted on Adivasi/marginalized groups that are already struggling against tremendous odds. The treatment of grassroots as pure space for alternatives to development makes Adivasis bear the burden of history.

New social movement representations: Although Habermas (1987) has written relatively little on social movements, his influence on this topic has been substantial, especially in terms of his conceptualization of the system-life world dichotomy and the suggestion that new social movements (NSMs) do not seek material compensation from the welfare state but are struggles over the grammar of life. Keeping in mind that Habermas' conceptualization of NSMs is intended for advanced welfare-capitalist societies, what are some possible implications of his formulations on NSMs for Adivasi social movements in an industrializing country, given that he is concerned with emancipatory transformation and does suggest a plausible theory with implications for praxis in modernizing contexts?

A case in point would be the mounting evidence of penetration by the system (commercial and bureaucratic) into the "material affairs" of the Adivasi life world in the form of dams, mining operations, commercial/state forestry and the like. This might help to explain one of the Adivasi movement preoccupations -- namely with subsistence and survival concerns as forests are destroyed. However, "material penetration" is not synonymous with the rational penetration of the Adivasi life world in terms of the colonization of Adivasi culture/meaning frames by instrumental rationalism/system rationality, as proposed by Habermas for advanced welfare-capitalist states. The Adivasi "grammar of life" is still relatively independent and hence, Habermas' conception of NSMs as defenders of the "grammar of life" (life world culture) applies to Adivasis but not to the extent that it does in affluent economic contexts where political preoccupations might arguably be reduced to cultural concerns as opposed to struggles over food and water.
There is, however, a more general concern about Habermas' euro centric ontological-epistemic normative project, that is, he privileges rationality, including making room for a system enhancing instrumental rationality and a life world-related critical communicative rationality characterized by self-reflexivity and the understanding that personal values are relative. This establishes a predefined collision course with Adivasi ontological-epistemic conceptions which tend to privilege conventions, traditions, elder knowledge, ancestors and Gods and spiritual knowledge that would defy Habermasian rational boundaries. Perhaps, this is what is at the core of Adivasi-modernist cultural intersections and the challenge for popular education initiatives that bring together Adivasis and modernists in a coalition.

The tension produced by this divide is often apparent during the process of critical dialogue between popular educators and Adivasis, as the former (having been exposed to structuralism and modernist knowledge categories) seem to pay lip-service at times, to Adivasi rituals, customs and explanations during the Freirian-inspired codification-decodification process, waiting to get to the "real politic" of legality, politics, material and system. It would not be an exaggeration to state that popular educators sometimes instrumentalize Adivasi knowledge convictions by tolerating them as a motivational exercise, before they get to talk "real action" in the interests of "real social change", of course all in the interests of the Adivasi! It would do well for popular educators working with Adivasis to take note of the distinct possibility that Adivasis do utilize an instrumental logic but within the expansive confines of a larger spiritual meaning frame which is the privileged epistemic position. Failure to pay serious regard to this crucial distinction and force home rational-material positions will alienate the Adivasi and the popular educator; destroy trust that is vital for "ideal speech situations"; and possibly bring back the "mask" that signals the beginning of "staged-relations". Perhaps, Habermas' conception of communicative rationality is in need of further democratization and/or the conception of life world needs to be more inclusive (Adivasi life world?) or is in need of further clarification.

Utilizing Habermasian theoretical conceptualizations, civil-societarian adult educators who recognize NSMs as political agents and as new sites of learning (Welton, 1997), help clarify the politics of such movements as being a politics of reform, influence and inclusion, while eschewing the "revolutionary fantasies" of the radical left. Similarly, Jarvis (1993) envisions a political-economy whereby the excesses of market efficiency are curbed by a strong state pushed by an activist civil society. Expressing a similar sentiment with reference to Adivasis in the Indian context, Parajuli (1991) suggests that Adivasis might be "shattered by the myth of universal gain and progress" originally promised by the developmentalist state. However, there can be no disillusionment if there was no illusion in the first place! If development was the God that failed, it was not an Adivasi god! The normative project espoused by these NSM advocates/conceptualizations are at odds with an Adivasi political project that, unlike in the case of other marginalized groups like most scheduled caste communities, is not a fight for inclusion in the democratic modernist project nor do they interpret their struggles as fights for "rights" from the state but rather for the opportunity to remain distinct, sovereign and Kondh Adivasi peoples, i.e., theirs is primarily a struggle for existential justice and cultural co-existence.

**Gramscian representations:** Gramscian representations of social movements and their political trajectory to establish a "proletarian hegemony" and a socialist society (Holst, 2002) are similarly at odds with Kondh Adivasi claims for self-determination. Experience has taught the Kondhs that the universalizing aspirations of a Marxist/Gramscian (counter) hegemonic project provides but another variant of the hegemonic discourses of modernity. Leftist parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Marxist-Leninist (CPIML) variant of the same or the
different brands of the banned underground Naxalite Movements in the area have paid scant regard for Kondh forest culture and their cosmological and spiritual beliefs pertaining to nature, ancestors and their Gods, while mobilizing and/or coercing them in the interests of gaining electoral victories in the case of the former entities, while the latter have used them as informants, providers of refuge and cash, guides and as soldiers in their guerrilla campaign against the bourgeois state and feudal interests. While the radical left's focus on state-capitalist-feudal interests/hegemony/exploitation in relation to 'peasants' (hunter-gatherer forest tribes?) and questions of survival, subsistence and material deprivation resonate with Adivasi motives and lived-concerns to a great extent, disrespect and disregard for Adivasi ways and political aspirations in relation to the creation of a revolutionary consciousness/vanguard (that privileges scientific and technological modernization) soon derails these partnerships, confirming the totalizing nature of these political projects and their authoritarian subtexts.

However, the Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony, historic bloc and a war of position and the neo-Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony are useful for critical analysis in popular education initiatives and in terms of informing an Adivasi praxis, especially if such understandings are used in conjunction with Kondh cosmological, epistemic and axiological/ethico-political commitments. Kondh aspirations would appear to be more in keeping with the more modest counter-hegemonic attempts to disorganize and disrupt hegemonic discourse and practices (as one potato in Marx's critical reference to lose counter-hegemonic coalitions as a "sack of potatoes", given the lack of a cementing/common revolutionary consciousness squarely aimed at capital) in the interests of eking out material, cultural and political space for the Kondhs, as opposed to the more grandiose revolutionary project for social movements as envisioned by Gramsci. In fact, Kondh elders often caution the community not to become so caught up in the struggle for power that they compromise the spiritual heritage that shaped their being, i.e., while the hegemonic struggle is over political, legal and economic issues of control and democratization, such physical/material dimensions are embedded in an over-arching spiritual dimension that should not be compromised in the process of acquiring physical/material power/control.

In India and in an Adivasi forest/rural context, state-capital and sympathetic classes and caste groups and kulaks or the wealthy feudal elite would define a hegemonic bloc. Counter-hegemonic action, including Adivasi groups, would be complicated by the number of social cleavages in the Adivasi context based on caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity; spatial considerations such as difficult/remote topography; and the time dimension in terms of long-standing historic disputes between social groups. Furthermore, popular educators need to recognize the Adivasi understanding of a coalition. Such coalitions are limited to joint socio-political action to take collective action against a hegemonic bloc that continues to deprive Adivasis of material and cultural space; a coalition that acknowledges the quest for Adivasi local autonomy, sovereignty and self-determination and that recognizes an essential Adivasi identity. Coalitions are not necessarily an invitation to form new cultural hybrids nor to advance critical positions that extol the virtues of transnational/transcultural "liberated subjects". Such impulses towards apparent isolationism/essentialism need to be understood in terms of the relentless assault on Adivasi space.

Finally, theories of consciousness including thick theories of false consciousness/hegemony of the Gramscian variety that justify a role for popular education in social movement activism, fail to acknowledge an Adivasi political consciousness that mediates an Adivasi "infra-politics" (Scott, 1990), which effectively extends the possibilities for a feasible political praxis on the part of Adivasis that does have counter-hegemonic implications. In our
partnership with the Kondhs, for instance, evasion, encroachment, foot-dragging and other forms of veiled political resistance to power have been exploited to the fullest, to extract even an ounce of space for the Adivasi. In fact "encroachment" has been institutionalized in our partnership as a viable strategy for exploiting land policies in the interest of securing Adivasi land tenure. Consequently, Scott's work on infra-politics not only challenges thick theories of hegemony/false consciousness; he also extends the political scope/possibilities of a Gramscian counter-hegemonic project that is more in keeping with an Adivasi daily politics of covert resistance.

Concluding reflections on popular education/praxis in Adivasi social movements

The assimilation of Adivasi struggles into the anti-development/environmentalist agenda, the modern-reformist agenda or the socialist project neglects history, i.e., that Adivasi people have always fought against outside oppression on their own terms. Their history of resistance long precedes the advent of developmentalism, environmentalism or socialism. Whether or not the Kondhs go "environmentalist" or become "rights/justice oriented" and recognize the "failed promise of development" by the state, is dependent on a process of popular education that seeks to widen the scope and purpose of such movements to include state-centered-developmentalist critique, resistance, articulation of new visions of the good life and/or make demands on the state to fulfill its commitments to the Adivasis. In these instances, a process of popular education would also seek to have Adivasis consider the possibility of joining in solidarity with other groups that profess such agendas, thereby essentially inviting them to participate in a wider process of resistance and redefinition of social structures and values. Ideally, this would be an Adivasi decision and not the result of some populist mobilization engineered to co-opt them into a struggle that is not of their design or choosing.

References


