

National Seminar on “Anthropological Histories and Tribal Worlds in India” at IAS (27-29 March 2017)

Concept Note:

Histories of ‘tribal’ peoples in India have been struggling continuously to respond to the increasingly complex present-day predicaments of peoples so described. If the task of History is to speak empathetically from conceptions of the past to the human condition in the present, this task is extremely fraught in the case of tribal peoples. They are mostly invisible in the statist archives and are definitionally the constitutive other of historical temporality and politics. Ethnography, History’s mirror twin, in its post-foundational avatar, has thus emerged as a critical site from which to challenge the protocols of History which do not admit terms from the life-worlds of the tribal peoples as legitimate grounds from where to write histories. The field of Anthropological History has provided a hopeful and exciting site from where to pluralize the practices of writing about tribal pasts.

Anthropological histories of tribal peoples have interrogated the epistemic and administrative practices that have constructed the category of the primitive tribal, including that of History and Anthropology, explored the emergence and sustenance of and changes in the identification claims of tribal peoples, and gestured towards the alternate imaginations of the past in the 68 self-presentations of these communities. These attempts have striven to re-center the modern historical/political as irreducibly plural and heterogeneous with the tribal as an acutely critical and dissonant sign within.

Yet, the project of fashioning meaningful anthropological histories for tribal peoples has also thrown up serious philosophical, methodological and political questions.

- How can we intimate the inextricable imbrications of our lived temporalities in historical prose so that the tribal worlds are neither fetishized as locations of singular, unique, pristine-utopian and authentic subjectivities nor completely assimilated into the disciplinary historical?
- Will the study of alternate cosmologies which engage with the historical but whose center of gravity lies elsewhere reaffirm a stereotype or signal a move that is politically more powerful? How might the political/historical be reimagined in this enterprise and can we risk that move?
- Can we look beyond translating tribal worlds and write from the entanglements of our shared temporalities; and from this vantage, what might the languages and vocabularies of the tribal-modern look like?
- What manners of texts could be crafted in this radical reworking of the historical roles and relationship of History and Ethnography and their critical interruption of each other?
- How might we explore tribal cosmologies and yet attend to tribal peoples’ present-day identifications and conditions of marginalization effectively and consistently?

- How will the explorations of the everyday of the tribal pasts change our sense of tribal victimhood and/or habitual rebellion, and of resistance, tropes within which tribal histories invariably get frozen? What kind of subjectivities come into view?
- Without setting up an inward-looking domain of 'tribal studies', how can we stay with the focus on tribal histories and still dialogue with other comparable non-tribal worlds and concerns that speak to our common dilemmas?

A National seminar on 'Anthropological Histories and Tribal Worlds in India' was organised at IIAS during 27-29 March 2017. Dr. Aditya Pratap Deo, Fellow, IIAS was the Convener of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Vijaya Shankar Varma, National Fellow, IIAS. Dr. Aditya Pratap Deo, Convener of the seminar gave introductory remarks. The keynote address was given by Professor Virginius Xaxa, Professor of Eminence, Sociology and Social Work, Tezpur University, Tezpur.

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