

The linguistic ecology of ‘particularly vulnerable tribal’ groups in Middle India: State-mediated ethnolinguistic erasure and neocolonialist ‘development’

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1 Introduction

The Indian national and local state policies of ‘development’ have had profound linguistic, sociocultural and demographic effects on so-called ‘particularly vulnerable tribal groups’ [PVTGs], who occupy the very lowest rung in the complex social hierarchy that defines the post-independence modern Indian nation-state. Popular belief expressed by the majority dominant Hindu and Indo-Aryan population asserts the advance of a ‘postcolonial’ contemporary India. However, a new politicized indigeneity has arisen recently in the highland belt of Middle India (Berger 2014) as certain PVTGs in no sense share in the postcolonial experience, and indeed have suffered in many ways more under the internal neocolonialist development schemes enforced on them by the ‘postcolonial’ Indian State regime than anything during the time of the British Raj.

The two ‘particularly vulnerable tribal’ languages we discuss here, Birhoṛ and Gtaʔ, from Jharkhand and Odisha, respectively, both belong to the Munda family, but they are only distantly related. The 8,000 Gtaʔ-speaking agricultural Didayi live in Malkangiri district, Odisha, and the natural rope product making Birhoṛ in Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Singhbhum districts, Jharkhand. The semi-nomadic Birhoṛ are now quasi-forcibly settled; how many speak Birhoṛ is unknown as ethnic shame has made some adopt the identity of higher status ‘literate tribals’ like Ho or Mundari. Data comes from authors’ field notes.

The negative consequences of the internal neocolonialist development practices pursued by Indian state agencies, and changes observed in the lexicon and grammar and the sociolinguistic status of the heritage tongues of these very low status micro-communities, suggest that the Gtaʔ and Birhoṛ have a common post-independence experience as PVTGs—a recent attempt at rebranding what was and still is known as ‘primitive and backwards tribal’ groups. Each stand at the very bottom of a complex and interconnected set of hierarchies of identity valuations within a complex multi-ethnic and multilingual local macro-setting, even if they are of course each embedded in different, distinct and specific sociolinguistic *milieux*. As such, their status demands ‘development’. Education when successfully implemented in the two communities is never in the mother tongue and always entails overt indoctrination into Hindu religious practices and identity, so as to remove overt signs of tribal cultural practice. Hindu-ization and linguistic Aryanization proceed in tandem. Herein we discuss factors that have led to a shared set of sociolinguistic valuation hierarchies that each is embedded within, that have arisen as a result of internal neocolonialist ‘development’ strategies for ‘particularly vulnerable tribal’ language communities, the Birhoṛ and the Gtaʔ.

1.1 The Birhoṛ tribe and language

The ethnonym Birhor (Birhor) is both an autoethnonym and also an autoglottonym for a set of clan-based extended family units who speak a Kherwarian Munda language. The name means ‘person of the forest’. The term is used as the autonym by three differently classified but identical Scheduled Tribes in the Indian states of Jharkhand and Odisha. Birhor is spoken primarily in small enclaves in Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Singhbhum districts and other small pockets in Jharkhand. Some speakers are also found in nearby adjacent parts of Odisha, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. Until recently the Birhor still engaged in their traditional economic pursuits in Jharkhand, making their living as semi-nomadic natural fibre rope makers (the *uthlu* Birhor), with rope and products derived therefrom being their primary monetized commodity. The Birhor *tanda* was their typical settlement, a set of temporary family unit leaf huts assembled near the edge of village markets. Forest degradation (Firdos 2005) has made this forest resource-dependent economy no longer viable, and many Birhor bands have been quasi-forcibly settled (the *janghi* Birhor), who undergo rapid acculturation to either low caste Indo-Aryan or higher status tribal groups like the Munda or Ho. Very little data has appeared on Birhor to date. A typical sample of the prodigal son parable in translation appeared in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India (1906), and a small bit of lexical data and a few sentences have appeared in various ethnographically oriented studies (e.g., Roy 1925, Adhikary 1984, Sahu 1995, Mishra et al. 1996, Dash 1998, Mukherjee 2000, Kumar 2004, Ota and Sahoo 2010), much of the data is however of limited quality and reliability. The brief publication of Osada (1993) is among the only ones published by a linguist. Some recent sociolinguistic data appeared in Sarkar (2012).

Estimates on the number of Birhor speakers vary wildly from only a few hundred speakers to tens of thousands. According to official demographic statistics derived from the Indian censuses, there are likely over 20,000 ethnic Birhor now. However, Indian census data that suggest a total of 19,494 Birhor reflect reported identity only, never language competence or use. The difficulty encountered in assessing the actual number of speakers stems not only from faulty language policies in census taking but also a variety of social factors that shape Birhor identity or its transformation, including ethnic shame, denial of knowledge of a low-status language, policies of ethnolinguistic erasure pursued by State agents, the mobile and fluid nature of Birhor communities, and the fact that Birhor people tend to adopt the identity of whatever group higher up on the ethno-linguistic hierarchy among whom they are settled, e.g., the Ho, Santali or Mundari. The Birhor tribe is one of the smallest tribes of the thirty-two scheduled tribes of Jharkhand State, India, and they have arguably the lowest social status of any of them. Note that in Odisha, the Birhor are known by three different official Scheduled Tribe names: *Birhor*, *Mankidi*, *Mankirdia*, the last two meaning ‘monkey eater’. The Odisha numbers include 596 Birhor + 2222 Mankirdia + 31 = Mankidi. Language retention rates vary considerably on the local level. The higher the degree of schooling and the longer the community has been forcibly settled and pursuing agriculture, the more acculturation to Hindu religious and social norms there is, and the greater incidence of shift to Indo-Aryan.

1.2 The ecology of Birhor language endangerment

The modern nation state of India has pursued a policy of hegemony by Indo-Aryan languages and identity over the subordinated ‘tribal’ languages of northern and central India. Such policies manifest themselves locally both covertly through a complete lack of access to educational materials at the primary, secondary or tertiary level in Birhor, and overtly through the categorization of tribal communities such as the Birhor and speakers of tribal languages considered to be illiterate and indeed, officially until very recently, ‘backwards and primitive’, an inherently biasing and biased phrase that endures to the present. As a result Birhor is increasingly restricted to home use conversations between older adult members of the community. Birhor speakers are faced with the rather unpleasant reality that their mother tongue has an extremely low status, with at least six different levels of languages valorized above Birhor: i) larger ‘literate’ tribal groups of the region, e.g., Mundari or Ho; ii) the Scheduled Munda language Santali; iii) the Indo-Aryan lingua franca Sadani/Sadri; iv) Scheduled eastern Indo-Aryan languages Bangla, Odia; v) Hindi; and vi) Indian English.

Birhor (and similar-status ‘primitive’, ‘illiterate’ or in today’s parlance, ‘particularly vulnerable’ tribal languages) thus stands at the very bottom of a set of linguistic hierarchies with their associated differential valorizations in the sociolinguistic milieu of contemporary India. Birhor people are always forced to linguistically accommodate to their neighbors, and never vice versa. This has had profound effects on not only the sociolinguistics, but the lexicon and morphosyntax of the language as well.

1.3 The Gtaʔ-speaking Didayi tribe

The language Gtaʔ is spoken by a Scheduled Tribe officially known as the Didayi in Odisha, India. While older speakers still call their language *gtaʔsa*, and an individual *gtaʔre* or *gtaʔremo* (Hill Gtaʔ) or *gtaʔremwa* (Plains Gtaʔ), the majority of younger people who speak the language instead call themselves *ḍiḍejremo/remwa* and their language *ḍiḍejb^(h)asa*. The former represent the traditional autoglottonym and autoethnonym and mean ‘speech of the clan’ and ‘person of the clan’, respectively, while the latter demographic set use both the exonym *ḍiḍej* ‘wild person’ for the ethnic group and for the language *ḍiḍejb(h)asa* now, both clearly borrowings from Indo-Aryan. Gtaʔ (Didayi, Didey, Gataq) has received very little documentation of any kind, but a comprehensive text-lexicon-grammar is in preparation by the first author of this study. Even reliable dialect information is lacking, but a major division between a Plains lect and a Hill lect is clear. The Gtaʔ language was unknown to science prior to the 1950s-1960s when speakers were identified by a joint American-Indian expedition. A few small studies emerged from this including Zide (1968, 1976), Mahapatra (1972, 1976), and Mahapatra and Zide (1972). The most recent studies of Plains Gtaʔ are a brief sketch by Vedamanickam (2002) and a somewhat longer one by Anderson (2008). In terms of traditional economy, Gtaʔ-speaking peoples mainly practice subsistence agriculture, mixed with gathering, and originally also hunting, forest resource management. Over the past centuries, Gtaʔ-speaking peoples have been discriminated against as beef- and pork-eating non-Hindus/non-Muslims. In modern times, the younger generations are undergoing rapid shift to Desia, the local variety of Oriya, and conversion to Hindu practices and low-caste Hindu identities.

1.4 Linguistic ecology of Gtaʔ

The linguistic ecology of Gtaʔ in southern Odisha differs somewhat from that of Birhor in northern Odisha and Jharkhand in terms of the number of degrees of hierarchies seen among the tribal languages at the lower end of the hierarchical scale. While there are quasi-literate tribal languages in the region like Sora, they are not in immediate contact with Gtaʔ and thus not really part of the local ecology. Also there are no Scheduled languages in the area other than the State language Oḍia in Odisha, or Telugu for the small number of Didayi people that might be found over the border in Andhra Pradesh. Only the regionally dominant tribal Indo-Aryan lingua franca Desia, which performs the same function that Sadri/Sadani/Nagpuri does in Jharkhand, stands above it, but the barriers remain the same in terms of access to the State, national or transnational level dominant languages for the Gtaʔ speaking population. In sum, as illiterate subalterns at the bottom of the complex ethnolinguistic hierarchy dominating contemporary Indian society both the Birhor and Gtaʔ are always forced to accommodate linguistically to the languages of their more valued neighbors, and never vice-versa.

2 ‘Tribe’ and ‘tribal’ in the Indian context

What we mean by the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’ in India requires some preliminary contextualization. ‘Tribe’ and ‘tribal’ in the Indian context can best be understood to refer to a social construct recognized by mainstream Hindu (+Aryan) society as being more or less outside of the normal boundaries of mainstream Hindu civilization (Xaxa 2008: 294). As pointed out by Brown (1997a: 29-31), it is of course quite natural for societies to define themselves in opposition to “Others”, and to identify and name such ‘Others’ as a preliminary means of exerting social control over them. Moreover, there is a definable tendency to assign to these specific ‘Other’ cultures traits and value judgments associated there with that convert what in origin were merely observed relative differences from a perceived default into a hierarchically valorized set of natural oppositions. When the defining and assigning group seeks hegemonic control over such ‘Others’, these falsely dichotomized oppositions create “absolute” categories such as ‘primitive’ vs. ‘civilized’, ‘modern’ vs. ‘traditional’, etc., perpetuating comfortable but false Durkheimian or Weberian dichotomies such as ‘tradition’ vs. ‘modernity’, etc.

While Scheduled Tribe has more or less a specific meaning, or at least can be defined administratively (see below), an academic consensus on the specific definition of the terms ‘tribal’ and ‘tribe’ as used in India remains elusive. Many scholars have put forth specific definitions, and these unsurprisingly often reflect the broader intellectual *milieu* from which they arose. The definitions combine a rotating checklist

of cultural traits which reference religion, economy, governance, language and geography, the more of which features a community exhibits the greater their degree of 'tribalness', and concomitantly the more pronounced is their 'primitiveness' or 'backwardness'. For Majumdar (1958), a tribe is a social group with a territorial affiliation, which is endogamous without specialization of economic roles or functions, one that is ruled by tribal officers, hereditary or otherwise, who are united in language or dialect, who recognize social distance with other tribes or castes but without caste stigma, who follow 'tribal' beliefs and customs, and are unsympathetic to a homogeneity of ethnic and territorial integration. Sachchidananda (1981) on the other hand focuses on criteria to define tribe such as the lack of written language, using a relatively simple agricultural technology, possessing social institutions that are cast 'in a simple mold', small numbers in terms of populations (relative to large civilized Hindu groups), who maintain a relative geographic or physical isolation, who exhibit a slow rate of cultural change, and who lack a time-depth in their understanding of history. That both of these differently but distinctly instantiate biases towards marginal(ized) communities is self-evident, as is that each scholar fetishizes and denigrates some aspect of their cultural practices as viewed through the prism of mainstream/civilized/caste Hindu society.

The history of the word 'tribe' in the Indian context and in particular how it differs from the categorization of low castes of the Hindu hierarchy is quite complex. As discussed by Xaxa (1999: 3589), it was the goal of the ethnography of the colonial period to differentiate caste from tribe and tribes from each other, while Indian ethnography in the post-independence period has largely promoted a completely unsubstantiated revisionist history of the allegedly peaceful and natural/evolutionary nature of the interaction of tribes with mainstream Hindu civilization. Some early Indian ethnographers focus on the fluid nature of tribe-to-low-caste cultural shifts and the continual absorption of tribal elements into the Hindu mainstream. Such scholars as Ghurye (1943, 1963) can be outright hostile to the concept of 'tribal' as anything but debased Hindus; see also Bose (1975). Ghurye describes 'so-called tribals' as Backward Hindus simply and rejects them as misguided constructs. Indeed the concept of 'tribe' has always been and is inextricably tied to processes of absorption into the 'mainstream' in India: Tribal distinctness is by definition tied to lack of incorporation into the mainstream, based on certain cultural practices, ones that had yet to be assimilated to 'civilized norms', in other words the tribal cultures continued being distinct only insofar as they had managed to escape colonization and subjugation by either British or Indian State (neo)colonial agents (Xaxa 1999: 3593).

As Chaudury & Patnaik (2008: 3-4) point out, "mainstream" in the Indian context "carries political, economic or material connotation in addition to the cultural one." and implicit in the idea of mainstream is the idea of integration. And of course, only once acculturation has progressed adequately can a politicized indigeneity be asserted, and this likely, and maybe necessarily will, have to resort to State-mediated performances of indigeneity and other ascribed forms of indigeneity that are the only State-sanctioned means through which a tribe can assert their identity and political role, in other words only when they acquire these features of the mainstream can they then try to fight the cultural hegemony of the mainstream (Channa 2008: 75).

Even academic discourse of more recent times have not resolved what features of these 'Others' constitute 'tribal' cultural practices. According to Chaudury & Patnaik (2008: 6) in the Indian anthropological literature, 'tribe' can be assumed to refer to a group that is i) relatively isolated or semi-isolated community living mainly in forest, hill or hill clad settings, ii) with an autonomous cultural system, iii) who maintain economic self-sufficiency with primitive or crude mode of exploiting natural resources involving low-level of technology, iv) who are distributed within a well demarcated territory, v) who possess a distinct world view or cosmology, belief system, folklore and deities, and vi) who have their own dialect." Clearly such ideas are rooted in the concepts of minority vs. majority ethnicities that dominate the language ideologies of most modern Asian nation-states, and whose origins are rooted in the Stalinist (1913) concept of ethnicity, in turn themselves borne of the intellectual tradition that considered ethnic groups and societies as constituting a naturally hierarchized order of distinct types that was first made popular by Morgan (1877) in the mid-19th century.

In official Indian discourse, language is subordinated to the perceived degree of Otherness in relation to considerations of deviations from the default Hindu-religious dominant majority identity. In particular, 'culture' and 'mindset' appear to take the fore among the six criteria outlined above. However as for the

languages (or really 'dialects' since tribal people have dialects not languages of course) tribal communities in India, it might be said that these can be overlooked or glossed over as it is basically a given that the civilization that is to be brought to tribal people will ultimately entail use of an Indo-Aryan language and thus an inevitability of the expansion of Aryan linguistic hegemony. The only exceptions to this come from non-marginal Dravidian majority languages of the Hindu ethno-states of South India that have long-established literary traditions that do not necessitate such a process of Aryanization (for example Tamil in Tamil Nadu or Telugu in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, etc.). In the most recent period, lip service has been paid to the value of tribal languages to be used as media of instruction in early primary schools in tribal majority areas across India, although such beliefs remain largely hypothetical and not really to be implemented.

'Tribe' in India is thus always conceived by definition by Hindu administrators and scholars as outside of civilization (Xaxa 1999: 3591). Indeed, among the key factors for considering tribal people of Middle India as 'indigenous' in the United Nations sense, according to Xaxa (1999), is this sense of marginalization. Other criteria include Xaxa (1999: 3592), citing Pathy (1992: 8) that tribals have been victims of conquest and colonization and ethnic identity, show loss of control over their customary territorial resources, cultural annihilation and powerlessness. Pathy (2008: 315) suggests that all tribal people in India have a common neocolonial present, and all of them face "recent recolonization of their territories, general economic subjugation, socio-cultural stigmatization and various degrees of ethnocide, as well as lack of political power..." Further for (Xaxa 1999: 3590) while the cut-off point of indigenous is prior possession of land at the time of Euro-colonial conquest reflecting the UN conceptualization of the term, Xaxa also believes indigenous carries a religious meaning in the Indian/tribal context as he believes that you can not be indigenous if your community has been absorbed into Hindu culture, rejecting the increasingly politicized requests by lower caste Hindus for ST status that have been motivated by economic concerns.

According to Xaxa (1999), one of the few 'tribal' scholars who has addressed this issue of what it means to be tribal in India one should add the following criteria, defining tribal as those people who live by their own social, economic, cultural institutions rather than those of the nation-state (Xaxa 1999: 3590); and who until recently "maintained practically autogenous sources of legitimization of cultural and social processes and were accentuated by the ideology of a self-regulated economy and had only marginal articulation with the external political structures" (Xaxa 1999: 3593), and communities that were brought under uniform administrative and legal structures under British colonial rule but under the politico-economic process only in the post-independence period. Tribal is thus an administrative term perpetuated by social workers, State agents and scholars (Xaxa 1999: 3589). This identity was forced on these groups from the outside to differentiate them from dominant community, but has now become internalized. Along the way, there has been an expansion in the sense of community from the local to the transnational among people who self-identity by this term. According to Xaxa (1999: 3595) *adivasi* consciousness and articulation of indigenous people status is not so much about whether they are the original inhabitants of India as about the fact that they have no power whatsoever over anything (land, forest, river, resources) that lies in the territory they inhabit, despite being the original inhabitants.

The concept of tribal in India is amorphous and defined only in context of populations conceived as outside of the Hindu/Aryan mainstream that have certain land ownership and religious practices, as well as social-political institutions that differ from perceived mainstream norms. However, the administrative concept of a Scheduled Tribe in modern India is never really questioned in either official or academic circles as the term in theory has a definable set of criteria. For example Article 342 of the Indian Constitution defines Scheduled Tribes as communities that have the following essential characteristics i) indications of *primitive* traits, ii) distinctive culture, iii) *shyness* of contact with the community at large, iv) geographic isolation v) backwardness.

However, two other such official administrative categories exist near the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy of India: these are the Scheduled Castes [SCs] and the Other Backwards Classes [OBCs] that share most if not all of these features. The distinctions between these groups are opaque, but relate to land ownership rights, religion and economic pursuits. Only the Scheduled Tribes [STs] can own land among these three, and both the OBCs and STs can be of any religion while SCs are by definition low caste

Hindus. Typically OBCs and STs are subsistence cultivators and/or forest resource managers, while SCs are typically craftsmen and/or engage in low-status commercial activities like leatherwork or blacksmithing. However, a further complicating factor is that such communities must have been declared as such by the President. Also, such groups are 'notified' for each State or Union Territory and this status is valid only within the jurisdiction of that State or Union Territory and not outside. Thus the Chick Baraik are considered to be a ST in Jharkhand but a SC in Odisha (*SPST* 2013). The Tamriya Mundari on the other hand have very recently been reclassified from ST to OBC in Jharkhand due to sufficient Hindu acculturation to the point of lacking sufficient 'tribalness' to merit this status any more (Newspaper, *Dainik Jagran*, 22nd July 2017), at least in the eyes of the neocolonialist administrators.

Until very recently the lowest valued group of Scheduled Tribal people were known as "Primitive" Tribes or "Primitive and Backwards Tribes". This designation has recently been re-branded officially as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups [PVTG]. As Pfeffer (2014: 260) notes, "backwardness" alludes to poverty, ill health and illiteracy but devalued cultural practices are implied, so in other words, these populations are not just poor "but different in ways the administration depreciates". According to *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013* (2013: 1), a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group is one that has i) a pre-agriculture level of technology, ii) a stagnant or declining population, iii) extremely low literacy iv) a subsistence level of economy.

While criteria ii) and iii) can be quantified and measured, criteria i) and iv) are entirely subjective and difficult to assess, and indeed impossible objectively to differentiate from caste Hindus in more socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of India who bear no such designation and who typically also align with the PVTGs in criterion iii) as well. One cultural practice that for the State agencies embodies backwardness or particular vulnerability is what is known in southern Odisha as *podu* cultivation, the burning of hillsides and the subsequent rapid hoeing of ash into the ground and cultivation for a few seasons and then letting the forest land return for some time to be restored. This practice has been explicitly banned by the State, but *de facto* continues as the local populations would starve otherwise. Another particularly devalued set of traditional cultural practices are the inverted tribal norms of Middle India Highland belt in the management of cattle from the Hindu 'norm': tribal people in this area eat beef and eschew milk (Berger 2014: 35).

Also, while on the macro-level, Indo-Aryan speaking SCs may have a supra-local prestige status, they are locally subordinate to many ST communities. Pfeffer (1997: 7-11) describes SCs as standing in a position of clients among their ST landholding tribal patrons, who engage in weaving, metal-work, and serve as traders craftsmen, musicians, messengers and animal tenders, that they serve as cultural brokers, intermediaries and boundary crossers who allowed tribals to maintain their 'splendid' isolation. As Pfeffer points out, the tribal areas have never been self-contained, self-sufficient regions, but rather have always depended on trade with the outside world. Moreover, their society has never been as unstructured or non-hierarchical as fantasized, and that (Pfeffer 1997: 13) seniority and sub-tribe concepts dominate almost all inter-tribal relations in the area too.

3 'Development' of Scheduled tribes' by the State and their ethnolinguistic erasure

Before discussing some of the specific failures of State policies and the ideology of development in the context of Indian tribal languages and communities, we must first bear in mind Dube's (1998a: 3) warning that "national development does not necessarily mean development of all segments who constitute the nation." Clearly this is true when taken from the perspective of the most marginalized communities. In the tribal Indian context, development is internal neocolonialism, with a cycle of dispossession of all tribal resources by outsiders, often under the direction of the State itself, such that "lowlanders have—under the pretense of development—used their vast numeric majority to crush the indigenous tribal constitutions that have been the local guidelines in past millennia. The onslaught has been organized by the agencies of the modern bureaucratic state" (Pfeffer 2014: 274). The result has been that the tribal communities have been progressively dispossessed of land, forest, water and mineral resources of their own territory and increasingly subjected to inhuman misery, injustice and exploitation (Xaxa 1999: 3594).

In principle, 'development' is supposed to elevate the physical and economic health of the community, to provide them education that will in turn serve as a gateway to employment and as a means to advance socially. None of these goals have even been approximated successfully. To be sure, the internal neocolonialist policy of 'development' pursued by agents of the Indian State has had some positive features, but overall it has been an orchestrated move by state agencies to i) Hindu-ize their population religiously and socially, ii) force foreign agricultural and animal husbandry practices on them economically, iii) destroy their traditional livelihood opportunities through restricting access to and destruction of forest resources, or physical displacement by economic development projects like hydro-electric dams, iv) to Aryanize them linguistically.

Economically it is clear that development has been almost a complete failure for the particularly vulnerable tribal groups. Singh (1998b: 170) reported on the rising indebtedness among the tribal people from 14.4% in 1975-1976 to 33.77% in 1982-1983, a truly enormous rise during this intense period of 'development' of these communities. Food speculators, non-tribal liquor-vending contractors and traders have caused much of this misery (Singh 1998b: 173). Industrialization has been disastrous for the environment (e.g., the destruction wrought by NALCO in Koraput), even while such ventures enfranchise a new small petty bourgeoisie or tribal elite, e.g., in Jharkhand. Post-independence State dam projects displaced numerous tribal communities and opened new opportunities for land exploitation immigrants without compensation, such as the Balimela hydroelectric project which has displaced at least half of the Gta? population. To make things even worse, the new settlements are basically "gated communities for thousand of skilled immigrants, with the local cultivators being simply removed to urban slums" Pfeffer (2014: 267). In terms of physical health, there has been none of the improvements predicted by proponents of 'development'. Indeed, (Pfeffer 2014: 275) reports that the "physical and metaphysical conditions of life (of the highlanders of Middle India) have **not** improved during the past sixty-five years, but have deteriorated dramatically". Sabar (2012: 196) asserts there has been a significant decline in livelihood of the community since 1994 when the Chuktia Bhunjia Development Agency began. Unfortunately, despite the stated aspirations of virtually every development plan for STs and the P[V]TGs in particular to increase the health of the community, there are various indications that the reverse is occurring. According to Cheepi (2010: 231) citing [NFHS 3 M/O Health & Family Welfare] data, the child mortality rate and the under-5 mortality rate of STs is the highest among all groups (97.7/1000), including the SCs and the OBCs, the child mortality rate in particular being almost twice the average rate (35.8 vs. 18.4).

Aryanization and Hinduization are parallel and unstated goals of the modern Indian State for the tribal citizenry. These processes of acculturation are intimately tied to the discourse of development and progress as orchestrated by State policy and agents. To be sure, planned Aryanization and Hinduization are parallel and unstated goals of the modern Indian State for the tribal citizenry. These processes of acculturation are intimately tied to the discourse of development and progress as orchestrated by State policy and agents. Many programs seek to clandestinely achieve these goals. Take for example the Integrated Rural Development Programmes which in theory are economic in nature and promote self-employment, but many who take part in such are encouraged to take up rearing of milk animals in place of draught animals (Rath 2006a: 33), where promoting cattle for milk not meat inverts Middle Indian Highland tribal norms (Berger 2014: 35), promotes ethnic shame and a break from local tribal traditions and identity in favor of neo-nationalist ones.

Both of these however are intimately connected to issues of language and to state-formation. Indeed Xaxa (2008: 302) argues that linguistic acculturation is more important than religious acculturation even in the implementation of the neocolonialist paradigm through 'development' and that (Xaxa 2008: 296) acculturation, Hinduization and social stratification in villages are all also interdependent on state-formation, which fosters transformation of the tribal socio-political system into the regional caste system. However, this too is connected to language as pointed out by Xaxa (2008: 301): "it is not possible for a tribe to become a caste without first being integrated into the structure of Hindu society. Where such integration has occurred, every important process has seen the adoption of the language of the regional community by the tribe. A caste as a social organization is operative only within a linguistic community. Hence it is possible for a tribe to become a caste only after it has been assimilated into the regional linguistic community."

State laws reinforce cultural norms, such as the banning the consuming and selling of alcohol and beef, while State educational institutions often serve as the front-line enforcers of such norms by the forced drinking of cow milk by tribal students, where “immigrant teachers always force tribal students to avoid beef and to drink milk” (Pfeffer 2014: 275), when in the tribal belt of southern Odisha, drinking milk is considered akin to bestiality, repulsive to many in the same way it would be to force school children to drink a random stranger’s breast milk in the West or mainstream India would be.

It is not too harsh or overstated to assert that development schemes for the tribals have been across the board poorly conceived and ineffective in central and eastern ‘mainstream’ India. Such schemes often have resulted in the alienation of the tribal communities from both their traditional resources and livelihood and modes and means of cultural expression and from the development apparatus itself, and, as they serve as proxies for the State, the State itself. The State is also locally represented by corrupt forest officials and police, both of whom in turn serve as random enforcers of the alienating State policies but almost exclusively for personal gain, as well as simultaneously serving the often identical interests of various corporate entities, in a vile nexus of crony capitalism (Mohanty 2014: 170) and cynical legislation at the State and national levels, all done by, and benefitting almost exclusively, non-tribal actors which has become widespread in the tribal areas of highland Middle India. Kumar (2014: 70) assess the situation in Odisha as one in which the “political ruling class and state apparatus have smoothly merged into a coalition with global exploitative capital. The outcome is a crass crony capitalism (the state-corporate nexus) and capture of the state apparatus by the extractive sector. The local administration and police often act as executive arms of companies.”

Pathy (2008: 315) assesses the neocolonialist nature of Indian State-tribal relations as follows: “(t)he fundamental asymmetry in the decision-making process and the ideological tenets for expropriation of their resources that existed in the colonial times have not only continued in the post-colonial context but are consolidated and aggressively articulated. In a broad qualitative sense, the criticality of the survival of the tribal people and their social reproduction as collective cultural entities happens to be primarily a post-colonial phenomenon.” Pathy attributes the adherence of Indian State constructors to an ideal nation state model “led to a state sponsored process of cultural homogenization, standardization and thus subjugation of ethnic minorities in general and tribal people in particular” (2008: 316).

Despite the revisionist fantasies of Hindu-Aryan hegemony, colonialist policies or realities have almost always been expanded or worsened in the neocolonialist post-Independence phase. Brown (1997a: 42) succinctly reminds us that we should expect this, as anti-colonialist reactionaries espouse and reproduce the very categories of the colonial order. So scholars attribute the rise of Hindu and Aryan land-grabbers, money lenders, liquor vendors and general exploiters to the lack of land records from the area due to its isolationist neglect by British colonial administrators, thus leaving the naïve tribal people with land ownership deeds and thus open to such predatory capitalists (Rath 2006b: 83)—albeit Hindu-Aryan ones not British as this might imply—or they were so uneducated that it was also easy for literate money lenders etc., to swindle these tribal people out of their money when they did get some. However, this practice has continued unabated and indeed massively expanded in the neocolonialist period as well, such as when Bengali refugees who were settled in the Dandakaranya Project in Orissa in 1984 started acquiring the land of tribal people illegally, and some got forest leases and subsequently destroyed these by clear cutting (Rath 2006b: 71).

Forests rank among the strongest emblems of tribal identity and represent connection to space, land, and time. These particularly powerful cultural symbols will be an emerging political battleground if politicized indigeneity movements can be decoupled from Maoists separatist movements moving forward in the tribal belts of highland Middle India. According to Tripathy (2012: 236), since Indian Independence “the diversion of forest land for non-forest land user has continued unabated” by state and commercial concerns and this has predictably caused floods, soil water-logging, increased erosion of fertile lands, and extensive silting of rivers. Colonial-era restrictions on forest use were reified and extended in the 1952 forest policy that added further restrictions on tribal people, barring cultivation and permitted grazing only with a permit that was difficult to obtain. Unsurprisingly, despite a constructed reality of renewed interest in tribal rights to their traditional territories and forest resources (Tripathy 2012: 239) as embodied in the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, nothing

has in effect changed, and indeed has only worsened; Chaudary (2014: 6) echoes the same sentiment. Similarly, (Mohanty 2014: 180) assures us the appropriation of forests by state continues rampantly despite the Indian Supreme Court declaration of 18 April 2013 asserting tribal rights over the very same, acknowledging such. Given that no one in place to enforce such a policy appears to care that the psycho-social connection to place that tribal people feel with their territorial forest is real, and that a whole complex of behavior, cognition and emotion are rooted to this (Mohanty 2014: 184), nothing will change.

Tribal movements in India today are mainly caused by exploitation from outsiders, by economic deprivation, or by separatist goals, and in focus they tend to be forest-based or agrarian, grounded in a particular socio-religious or socio-cultural ethos or seeking political autonomy (Debnath 2014: 218). It is an unfortunate fact that all rural tribal social movements have been subordinated in the popular imaginary and cynically exploited by State agents and media sources as related to 'the Maoists', a convenient fiction that has been a boon to the State, permitting the State to claim any such resistance as Maoist and thus something that has to be crushed (Mohanty 2014: 186).

Newly self-governing India inherited a colonialist apparatus upon Independence and with that came a number of far-reaching and impactful consequences for determining the likely outcome of State-minority interactions: assimilation of the minorities to the State-sanctioned and State-licensed national culture, as it is assumed that the stronger the group identity, the weaker will be the national identity of the group (Brown 1997b: 52). In section 2 above we outlined the concepts of tribe and tribal in the Indian context as 'Otherness' in the contexts being outside of Hindu religious and Aryan linguistic hegemonies in the colonial period and of Indian State socio-political and economic hegemonies in the neocolonial period. Brown (1997b: 51, 53) maintains that States order multiple cultures through systems of distinction and hierarchy and this could not be more clear in the case of State-tribal relations in the neocolonialist 'development' paradigm, and that regulating domination in this system of course may range from mild discrimination to extreme repression. Neocolonialist State agents engage in both even today in tribal areas of highland Middle India.

4 State-tribal relations and ethnolinguistic erasure in neocolonialist India

To be sure, the relationships of the State and its agents with tribal communities are ones that can be characterized by the *infantilization of tribal communities* by overbearing Mother India, the *sexualization of tribal communities* by paternalistic agents of State (so maybe 'Creepy Uncle India' is better), the *folklorization or dehistoricization and commodification of tribal identity* to reproduce Indian citizens as tribals in State service (despite being 'detribalized' to become better citizens in all other instances), and the *institutionalization of policies leading towards ethnolinguistic erasure* couched in rhetoric of 'development' and 'integration'.

Subtle means of erasure consist of policies of State protection which serve primarily to marginalize and subordinate non-national cultures (Brown 1997b: 54-55) in the construction of an 'imagined' national identity and culture which includes language (B. Anderson 2006). State formation is a kind of internal colonization and the State is constructed in part through reproducing cultural difference as cultural deviance from the national ideal (Brown 1997b: 56), a process that almost appears to necessarily entail a process of folklorization of some component cultures in the polity, in order to consolidate a national culture (Brown 1997b: 60). In Odisha for example in India, government sanctioned or mediated indigeneity takes the form of (Berger 2014: 23) "the representation of "colorful" tribalness at state-sponsored Tribal Fairs (*ādivāsī mela*), which mainly aspire to turn tribal communities into folklore and feed facile tribal symbolism into the notion of statehood.... (and the) "exotic" dominates in this representation of indigeneity". "(A) second form of ascribed indigeneity, performed in local primary schools, mainly constructs notions of "backwardness" within the dominant ideology of development. Here inversely mainstream symbols and ritual practices are infused into the local lifestyle. Attempts are made to "mainstream" local lifestyles by eradicating unwanted aspects of local culture and, in this sense, unmaking indigenous indigeneity... the first wants to display citizens as "tribal" and the other wants to turn "tribal" people into citizens."

Corruption and abuse are rampant According to Dube (1998a: 17), forest officials and contractors, excise officials and liquor vendors all have dispossessed communities at various times leaving them destitute and landless. To make things worse, the police symbolize extortion and abuse of state authority to the tribal populations, and have long preyed on them. Bureaucratic bungling and a waste of resources typify the development agencies (Dube 1998a: 19). As Rath (2006a: 35) succinctly summarizes the situation of six decades of development (through the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century) as “the social audit of this investment brought a great loss to tribes in the form of eviction, disappearance of community life and deprivation of common property resources.”

5 Tribal languages in the modern Indian nation state

When looking at the draft of policies by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, one can certainly find cause for optimism, but the realities on the ground in no sense match the good will and optimism expressed in such official documents. So one would love to see the edict that tribal peoples (p. 22) be reached in their own tribal languages and through media that is within their easy reach. What a difference one would see if the goals expressed (p. 10-11) that would reach the ideal standard of “to enable comprehension of lessons taught, tribal children will be taught in their mother tongue at least in the Classes I to III... Textbooks will be prepared in tribal languages and will acknowledge the role of tribal leaders and tribes people in the struggle for Indian independence and their contribution in other areas.” If only that had been reached today let alone by the end of the 11th Year Plan period that ended in 2012 as originally proposed! Given that there has for the most part only been lip service given to tribal languages as media of instruction and no actual implementation (Choudhary 2012: 228), especially among ST children in Odisha and parts of Jharkhand, where schooling is always in the state Aryan language Odia or Hindi, the sad fact is that schooling remains without meaning for most tribal children (Nambissan 2006: 33). Perhaps even more preposterous is the alleged redoubling of focus on female literacy and education in the ST communities, which can be said categorically to be failing (see below).

We fully agree with Pfeffer (2014: 259) in his assessment of ‘development and the role of education in State assimilationist policies of ‘integration’ that (n)umerous state efforts at “development” have amounted to the transformation of free cultivators with a local religion into Hindu untouchables in slums” and that while “most of the unique tribal structures continue to exist, ... “education”, as the major state effort, tries to undo them.”

The right to education only became real in April 2010 for children in India (Padhi 2012: 297), and many tribal children either have never attended school or drop out after one or two years. The Indian anthropologist S. C. Dube (1998b: 333) assessed the current state of Indian tribal education as “a dismal scene.” Education, when successfully implemented in almost all ST communities, is never in the tribal mother tongue and always also entails overt indoctrination into Hindu religious practices and identity. This serves the State purpose of removing overt signs of tribal cultural practice on a daily basis through ethnolinguistic erasure. Religious, social and cultural Hindu-ization and linguistic Aryanization proceed in tandem. Teachers are the main State agents in reproducing these purposes, as all teachers share what Berger (2014: 24) calls the “ideology of development”. Attitudes of the teachers towards the children they teach and to the value of teaching in such communities are often far from ideal, e.g., Padhy and Satapathy (1989: 115) report that “the teachers are generally non-tribal and hate the tribal way of life” and that they believe that the tribal child’s “limited experience thwarts his capacity for imagination”. As a result teacher absenteeism has remained a persistent issue (Padhy and Satapathy 1989: 114; Sahoo and Das 2006: 269-270).

Tribal attitudes towards education remain negative. Often an educated community member becomes ostracized (Padhy and Satapathy 1989: 115; Singh 1998a: 97) within the strictures of the traditional community society. Some of the reasons given for these attitudes by teachers and parents include that the teachers appointed in the schools of tribal area are non-tribal, and they see it as a punishment; parents are illiterate and indifferent or antagonistic to the value of education; the school year does not consider agricultural and festival calendars that regulate tribal society, and which constitute the same amount of off and on time as proscribed by the State, just not according to the typical school year; villages are often 5km or more from each other, making it impossible for small children to aggregate in schools; and that textbook

shortages are catastrophic (Sahoo and Das 2006: 269-70). Unsurprisingly, literacy rates among STs have lagged far behind national and state-level averages. Female literacy rates in particular have been dreadful, standing at often under 5%. Compare male and female literacy rates across the largest tribal states in mainland India from 1971 to 1981; while modest rises are seen, the overall official rate was poor (Sahoo and Das 2006: 259). Worse yet, these main areas where the STs reside in Odisha show lag behind other tribal areas in that state and of course the state as a whole. So while 9.5% tribal overall literacy in 1971 was bad enough, it was nearly three times lower in the southern Odisha tribal belt (Behera 2012: 250)

This allegedly had risen to 18.1% overall tribal literacy by 2001 in the southern districts of the state as compared with 37.4% of STs in Odisha overall, and this in theory represented 8.29% of females in this area (as compared with 23.36% for STs overall in the state). However, in the (then) three poorest parts of southern Odisha with the largest tribal populations, we find significantly lower rates of literacy for females, e.g. in Rayagada 3.45%, in Kalahandi 4% and a mere 1.93% in Koraput (includes present-day Koraput and Malkangiri districts). When breaking these down further we find the population of Malkangiri to be less literate than that of Koraput (Padhi 2012: 293). Further, as Behera (2012: 250) points out, these are likely exaggerated, as in 2001, among reported tribal 'literate' 44.7% were without any education level or one below the primary level. However these official census derived literacy rates are likely both exaggerated and always in the local Indo-Aryan Odia, as Birhor remains an unwritten language in Odisha and elsewhere, where literacy of course would be in either Hindi [Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh] or Bangla [West Bengal].

Official State statistics on tribal literacy suggest significant successes of this development scheme. Between 1961 and 2011 literacy among tribals allegedly increased from 8.53% to 58.96% (*SPSTI 2013* 2013: 13), but national policy statements from 2016 () show that literacy and arithmetic skills are lagging significantly behind expectation and that State-run elementary schools are the primary vectors of this failure (2016: 23-25). While the official rate of Birhor literacy at 37.1% (although in reality this is much lower) stands quite a bit lower than the alleged norm as reported by the government figures, the literacy situation with the Gta? is dreadful. Over thirty years of implementation of literacy efforts among the Didayi tribe, official statistics showed a modest rise from [Mohanti and Mohapatro 2014: 39] 1.5% to 12.6% for males in this time, but only from 0.0% to 3.4% for females. A resulting rate of 3.4% literacy for females in this community after 30 years of State-mediated efforts could in no sense be seen as a success. Even researchers promoting State development ideologies cannot escape from this fact, as stated by Mohanti and Mohapatro (2014: v) that the "[p]lanned development intervention for the tribal people over a half a century and more specifically, micro-level efforts for the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups including the Didayi over nearly two decades have not achieved the desired result"—a stunning admission in a study sponsored by the Planning Commission of the Government of India.

6 Summary

The Birhor and Gta? people have suffered tremendously at the hands of the neocolonialist State agents who pursue policies of assimilation and ethnolinguistic erasure, disenfranchisement and abuse, in a horrific nexus of State-mediated crony capitalism and cynical legislation and orchestrated displacement all under the banner of socio-economic development and education. As the most despised 'Others' in the neo-nationalist identity, the smallest, most devalued and most fragile subaltern tribal communities like the Birhor and Gta? are most vulnerable to the increasingly strong Hindu/Aryan-hegemonic goals of the post-Independence modern Indian nation-state, and rather than offering actual solutions that are relevant to actual and real improvement of the rather dismal state of these communities, the allegedly post-colonial State agents pursue policies much more egregious and sinister in their effect than anything the British colonialist regime managed to enact in the tribal belt of Highland Middle India. The tribal communities are by now so destitute and disenfranchised by State policies of 'development' and so adversely affected by the consequences of the crony capitalist nexus which State agents enable, that they are left to accept State-mediated displays of tribalness at grim ethno-zoo festivals as the only socially acceptable means of expressing their identity, while most outside of such venues seek to shed any overt trappings of tribalness as fast as they possibly can, including, of course, their languages.

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