

PART 3

Tensions Between National Models of Development, Religious Equality, and Respect for FoRB

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Chapter 5

'We Put God and Drums in the Front': Spirituality as Strategy in an Adivasi Self-Empowerment Movement*†

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1 Introduction

'By reviving our culture, we have found dignity and honour, we can dance and sing without fear. Our women are respected now. Earlier we had the status of bonded labourers, now we assert our identity as Adivasis.' This is how one member of 'The Programme', an obscure self-empowerment movement of Adivasis in India, explained the changes she had experienced over approximately 15 years of membership. To understand and explain her experience, and the experiences of many others, this contribution will examine how groups of Adivasis successfully use cultural and spiritual practices to challenge dominant interests, secure rights – especially to land – and empower themselves, despite an increasingly oppressive and hostile political climate in India.

In the contemporary Indian context, Adivasis (together with Dalits) are among the most marginalised and dispossessed communities. Many continue to live in forms of bondage and oppression that have long been outlawed, yet from which it is practically impossible to escape. The Programme intends to facilitate an escape. The organisations involved shall remain anonymous, to minimise the risk of reprisals, and their activities will be referred to only as The Programme (see section 3). This is the first time that The Programme's methods have been evaluated in published research. It has features of both a civil society intervention and an indigenous social movement. It aims to enable people who are trapped in debt bondage to work together in a spirit of solidarity, collectively escape bondage, encroach and settle land, practise subsistence agroecology, and finally gain land titles. At each stage, spirituality plays a central, strategic role.

Spirituality, rather than religion, is the term used by The Programme, often in connection with 'culture' ('cultural-spiritual reconnection'), to refer to invocations of traditional belief systems that are mobilised towards fostering self-empowerment. Self-empowerment as understood here is a process of transformative change, driven by the communities themselves, through which members escape exploitative relationships and gain resources, to enable a self-determined existence.

Spirituality is understood as a wider matter than religion, concerned not with the correctness of dogma or practice, but rather the possibility of

experiencing, or the expectation of, the transcendent and the supernatural.² Instead of articulating any particular codified belief system, The Programme weaves its motives, practices and goals into Adivasis' heterogeneous relationships with the transcendent and the supernatural, and thereby makes these relationships strategically expedient.

In brief, as a sketch of what is explained in greater depth below, to facilitate their escape from bondage and enable successful struggles for land rights, The Programme animates Adivasis to reinvigorate traditional cultural and spiritual practices. Both **ideologically** and **practically**, spirituality plays a role that is 'strategic', in the sense of exhibiting intention and purpose in relation to objectives (*cf.* Smithey 2009: 660–61).

Ideologically, in The Programme spirituality serves not only to create a sense of positive difference for Adivasis *vis-à-vis* dominant castes and outsiders. It also fosters feelings of strength, pride and the motivation to act collectively.

Practically, performing traditional spiritual practices helps The Programme's members to demonstrate the legitimacy and veracity of their claims to rights as indigenous people, with reference to particular openings in Indian rights-based legislation (*cf.* Nilsen 2018b). Culture and spirituality also serve in practical terms as a protective shield and alibi, with religious events enjoying greater *de facto* legal protection than protests, and cultural festivities serving as platforms for engaging high-ranking officials and politicians without being overtly 'political'. Visible displays of Adivasi culture and spirituality furthermore usefully help to distinguish The Programme's activities from those of the staunchly secular Naxalite Maoist insurgency, which the Indian government violently suppresses. Hence, as members of The Programme put it, they reduce the risk of persecution and increase their agency when, instead of chanting political slogans and invoking armed resistance, they put 'god and drums in the front'.

The intended contribution of this publication is threefold. First, for 'insiders', such as activists and organisations working closely with vulnerable groups, I aim to build a greater understanding of how spirituality can enrich strategic action repertoires for self-empowerment, to enable emulative experimentation. The role of spirituality outlined here may be applicable or adaptable in other progressive socio-political empowerment efforts, in India and beyond.

Second, for a wider audience of 'outsiders', including development scholars, social policy experts and civil society actors, in particular those who support or fund social work with vulnerable marginalised groups, I aim to highlight the importance of protecting and creating spaces for exercising freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). FoRB can be a vector for progressive change, when used strategically by vulnerable marginalised groups. However, restrictions of FoRB around the world are tightening, threatening the existence of fragile communities (Tadros 2020).

Third, for a wider audience, particularly actors who can weigh in on relevant policy processes (domestically or internationally), I hope to draw greater attention to the Adivasis' situation. Despite partial successes, like those described here, many remain landless and powerless, are held in debt bondage, and are denied basic human rights and freedoms. Their efforts at self-empowerment are increasingly threatened by reactionary political forces. The recent attention paid to the FoRB of Muslims and Christians in

India has tended to eclipse the qualitatively different yet equally existential threats to the cultural-religious survival of India's tribal peoples.

Section 2 will provide context and background for a grounded understanding of The Programme. It will explain how a modern sense of Adivasi identity evolved through a history of conflicts and political struggles for land and against exploitation and assimilation, and what role spirituality played. Section 3 introduces The Programme and its goals and methods, describing the steps groups typically take on the self-empowerment journey and obstacles they commonly encounter. Section 4 examines in detail how spirituality features in this process. The final section concludes by highlighting how spirituality, thanks to being both innate and malleable, strategically enables action.

2 Adivasi political struggles in modern India – a review

2.1 Who are Adivasis?

Adivasi, meaning 'original inhabitant', is a collective name for the diverse tribal groups of India. According to India's 2011 census, Scheduled Tribes (or STs – this is India's official census designation for Adivasis) make up 8.6 per cent of the national population, around 104 million people, who are concentrated in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, West Bengal and Gujarat. Taken together, Adivasis, commonly referred to in the Indian context as 'tribals', constitute one of the world's largest surviving populations of indigenous people. Most are traditionally forest dwellers and have animistic religious practices, but have been dispossessed of their ability to access the forest and follow their spiritual traditions, which are inextricably intertwined with the forest.

Within extremely unequal India (Kohli 2012), STs are among the poorest and most marginalised people. STs' Human Development Index values are 30 per cent below the Indian average (Sarkar *et al.* 2006), and they suffer even worse health outcomes than Scheduled Castes (SCs – Dalits, or 'untouchables') (Maity 2017). Many Adivasis live in extreme hardship, not so much outside the Indian economy and society as absorbed into it on the worst, most subaltern and exploitative terms. They are held in debt bondage by landowning dominant caste groups and subjected to pressures to 'Hinduise'. Many have completely lost or are threatened with losing their traditional culture, religion and way of life.

The origin stories of Adivasis and Dalits commonly trace both groups back to the same indigenous South Asian tribes, some of which were subordinated by a supposed pre-historic 'Aryan' invasion as 'out-castes' (Raj 2001: 137), while others continued living in the forests outside or on the fringes of empires.³ Prior to the 1800s, large regions of the Indian subcontinent 'remained largely outside the ambit of pre-colonial empires' (Kela 2006: 504) and were inhabited mainly by forest-dwelling tribes, whose contact with outsiders was limited but not non-existent.⁴ The forest tribes sustained themselves independently via mixed economies that blended subsistence farming with hunting, gathering, and occasional raiding (Kela 2006: 505–6, 521).

British colonial state-building, however, combined more absolute claims to the subcontinent's wealth with more advanced methods for revenue extraction, and accelerated the opening up of tribal lands by outsiders,

a process which has been further advanced by economic development and nation-building efforts in post-independence India. From the mid-nineteenth century through to today, immigration and settlement have 'produced radical dislocations in traditional Adivasi societies' as a 'flood of settlers – moneylenders, landlords, state functionaries, liquor dealers, shopkeepers, traders, farming castes' (*ibid.*: 510) expropriated tribals, either displacing them further into the forest or assimilating them as subaltern labourers and debtors.

The term Adivasi (original inhabitant) subsumes diverse tribal communities across India, comprising numerous different languages and cultural-religious identities. Tribal people usually identify themselves first as Gond, Bhil, Baiga or Kondh – only some of the better-known peoples living in central India's 'Tribal Belt' – or as members of subgroups of these. And yet:

the term Adivasi (or tribe, indigenous people, aborigines) is not easily dismissed... [V]arious social groups [i.e. tribes] – Bhil, Bhilala, Gond, Santhal, Munda, and hundreds of others whose presence is depicted [as] clusters of ink-spots dotted across the demographic map of India – use the term Adivasi to define themselves as a collectivity to stake claim to material and symbolic resources... Once created, the concept of Adivasi has taken on a life of its own, animated by the complex social practices have accrued around it.

(Baviskar 2005: 5106)

Anthropologists note that it was coined in the 1930s⁵ and became popular as an umbrella term 'out of a common experience of oppression, impoverishment and resistance during the colonial period', thanks to implying 'a superior right to land' *vis-à-vis* settlers (Kela 2006: 509). Some have also questioned whether Adivasis and neighbouring farming castes are cleanly separable, pointing to 'long histories of cultural exchange' (Baviskar 2005: 5106) and similarities in their peasant modes of production and cultural beliefs (Hardiman 1995; *contra*: Kela 2006).

Hindu 'fundamentalists have generally assumed that Adivasis are default Hindus' (Baviskar 2005: 5107), considering them 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1959, cited in Bhukya 2008: 108), and hence a part of their imagined India. However, in this 'caste imaginary', Adivasis sit alongside 'low' castes, as impure and in need of 'Sanskritisation' – changing their customs and ritual ideology – to rise socially and spiritually (Bhukya 2008). Both Adivasis and Dalits are similarly subordinated, yet, as Baviskar clarifies:

there is one crucial difference between Adivasis and Dalits: most Adivasis continue to have some access to land, whereas Dalits, as former service castes engaged in 'polluting' tasks like sweeping, scavenging, leather-work, cremation, and prostitution, do not. The link to land, especially to forested lands, gives Adivasis a certain cultural cachet that Dalits cannot claim.

(Baviskar 2005: 5109)

2.2 Expulsion, exploitation, resistance

The regions of India in which the remaining forest-dwelling Adivasi communities are concentrated are rich in natural resources, ranging from forest wealth to rivers that can be dammed and extractable minerals. The Indian state's national 'development' efforts – from farm modernisation to mineral wealth extraction – have continued to displace and dispossess Adivasi communities, which are often depicted as 'obstacles' to economic growth and national development. Environmental conservation and wildlife protection projects have led to the expulsion of some communities from forests they had inhabited for time immemorial, as part of conservation-induced displacement (Shahabuddin and Bhamidipati 2014), as well as to the imposition of restrictions that render forest-based livelihoods in effect illegal, such as bans on collecting forest products (Baviskar 1994; Shah 2018: 172–75).

A plethora of social and political movements resisting forest expropriation has emerged (and often subsided again). Some movements, such as those involved in the Narmada River dispute,⁶ garnered the support of outsiders with an idealised imagery of Adivasis as 'honest and simple' tribal people living in harmony with the forest (Whitehead 2007: 236). The widespread Adivasi rallying cry '*jal, jangal, Jameen*'⁷ – water, forest, land – (Kumbamu 2019: 239) emphasises claims to having natural rights as well as knowledge systems and identities that are symbiotic with nature. In resisting displacement and struggling for land rights, Adivasi activists have consciously displayed their indigeneity, making themselves visible to outsiders as 'ecological warriors' and 'indigenous performers' (Krishnan and Naga 2017: 892). Some have also sought to claim rights via more 'modern' articulations of identity, such as class or particular livelihoods; but these have often resonated less successfully with urban political elites and the middle classes than 'arguments embedded in "culture", "tradition", "religion", lifestyle, and identity' (*ibid.*: 894), in which 'spiritual connectedness' to particular localities plays a central role (Kjosavik 2010: 254).

These nature- and conservation-based activist movements have, however, constituted only the most publicly visible ones among a wider range of what Isin (2008) and Nilsen (2018a: 133ff) describe as contentious 'acts of citizenship': deliberate ruptures with existing power structures which serve to assert rights for subaltern groups in relation to the state. Although wrapped up in struggles over natural resources, Adivasis' subaltern position in contemporary India fundamentally is a class relation, and their struggles are class politics (*ibid.*: 260–63). As Baviskar (2005: 5106–7) bluntly puts it: 'To be an *adivasi*... is to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy.'

Adivasis have found themselves thrust into the modern Indian economy as subalterns, often as labour migrants in the lowest-paying sectors (such as brickmaking) or as debt-bonded agricultural labourers working on farmland that was once common forest. The post-colonial Indian state's constitutional designation of Adivasis as STs and its recognition of their historical oppression has led to some measures for affirmative action and special legal safeguards (as for SCs). On the whole, however, these have proved insufficient for Adivasis to attain social advancement within mainstream Indian society, except for a small minority, and then often

only at the expense of abandoning aspects of tribal identity and tribal land claims (*ibid.*; Moodie 2015).

One different, yet equally critical outcome of this fraught relationship with the Indian state, local elites and dominant groups has been the entanglement of Adivasi struggles with the Naxalite Maoist guerrilla insurgency. The insurgency, which began in 1967 with an uprising in the village of Naxalbari (West Bengal), is now ‘the world’s longest ongoing armed revolutionary movement’ (Shah 2018: xiv). Although Naxalites now count possibly as few as 10,000 persons under arms (*ibid.*), Indian political leaders have declared them ‘the most serious threat to national security in India’.⁸ The state’s counterinsurgency has been extremely violent, involving mass surveillance and the deployment of armed forces of more than 100,000 soldiers and police alongside local right-wing militia (Shah 2018: xvi–xviii).

Since the 1990s, Naxalite Maoist strongholds have mainly been located in Adivasi-inhabited, poorly accessible forest regions, where some Adivasis have joined the rebel cause. Adivasis now make up more than 90 per cent of the Maoist rank and file (Kumbamu 2019: 236) and, as the ethnographic study by Shah (2018) documents, some young Adivasis in Maoist-affected areas move fluidly between rebel camps and tribal villages. The Naxalites’ egalitarianism and autonomism match Adivasis’ own communitarianism and aspirations for greater self-government (*ibid.*: 20–24).

Sociologists have evaluated the partnership between Naxalite insurgent leaders and Adivasi supporters as ‘competitive state-building’, whereby the Maoists, whose leaders often hail from urban, non-Adivasi backgrounds, have constructed parallel governmental structures in tribal areas, which challenge the Indian state (Kennedy and King 2013: 36). Naxalite groups have provided some social services (such as schools and health camps) and incorporated Adivasis’ political struggles for land and against exploitation into their ideology and praxis, in effect recognising and cultivating among oppressed Adivasis a potentially revolutionary peasant class.

Naxalite leaders organise festivals commemorating Adivasi anti-colonial rebels as heroes. In areas under their control, they restore Adivasi families’ access to *mahua* trees, whose flowers are essential to artisanal alcohol production. Yet while Adivasi tribal self-empowerment efforts and the Naxalite struggle share some goals and personnel, tensions and discontinuities between the two movements also exist, and far from all Adivasis support the Maoists. Some aspects of Adivasi culture and tradition, especially concerning alcohol consumption and sexuality, also incur the disapproval and reformist zeal of Maoist leaders (Shah 2018: 140–42, 149–52).⁹

Only a very small share of Adivasis has actively joined the insurgents,¹⁰ but the Naxalites’ reliance on ‘Adivasis, as well as other supporters, to provide them with resources, such as food, shelter, recruits and intelligence’ (*ibid.*: 25) has led hostile elites and political actors to often conflate Adivasi self-assertion with insurgency. Those who campaign for tribal causes or challenge local power structures risk being branded as Naxalites. To minimise the risk of such ‘guilt by association’, The Programme has made its activities visibly ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ rather than ‘political’, as described in sections 3 and 4.

2.3 Forest rights and cultural rights: recent political gains and setbacks

Indigenous culture enjoys some level of legal protection in India. However, this legacy from prior progressive legislation is currently under threat from legal and political challenges, as well as a cultural drive for the Hinduisation of India led by the Sangh Parivar collective of Hindu-nationalist organisations, which recognises Adivasis (unlike Muslims and Christians) as native, but paints them as 'backwards' and in need of spiritual reform and cultural assimilation. The rule of the Congress-led centre-left United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition, from 2004 to 2014, brought hopes and progress to Adivasis' political struggles; the rule of government of Narendra Modi, since 2014, a range of setbacks.

The UPA catered to subaltern voters with a series of legislative initiatives that enshrined civil liberties and expanded socioeconomic rights, while, however, eschewing more substantial acts of redistribution (Nilsen 2018b). A crucial initiative was the Forest Rights Act (FRA),¹¹ which came into force in 2008. Passed by the coalition government in 2006, and co-written by tribal activists, the FRA was 'radical in many respects': it not only acknowledged historical injustices, but also practically stipulated that any land 'encroached' or held by STs before 2005 should belong to them (Kumar and Kerr 2012: 758f).

The FRA is one of the main legal instruments used by The Programme. Following decades of struggles to ensure or restore customary access to land, forests and natural resources, the FRA finally provided a legal route. It recognised the claims of individuals and groups belonging to STs, as well as 'Other Traditional Forest Dwellers' dependent on forests for their subsistence (Dlugoleski 2020: 227) as legitimate, with STs only being required to prove that, as of December 2005, they occupied and depended on the land. Others had to prove residence for at least three generations.

The Act thus clearly privileged claims made with reference to indigeneity, 'on the basis of religion or distinct spiritual practice' (*ibid.*: 239). Under the FRA, claimants can claim forest rights – land titles and rights to forest produce – either as individuals or as communities. In addition to rights, forest dwellers were also given duties to protect and conserve the forest, its wildlife and biodiversity. The FRA diverged from prior legislation based on colonial forest laws, which fundamentally conceived of protection as 'protecting the forests from the people for whom it was a habitat' (Nilsen 2018a: 72), and whose designation of previously common land as 'state forest', especially in the Indian Forest Act (IFA) of 1927, meant that:

forest dwellers living in these designated areas could often only meet their basic livelihood needs with the assent of the (often corrupt) state forest bureaucracy. Moreover, because these lands now belonged to the state, they could be evicted at any point. (Dlugoleski 2020: 224)

The FRA was passed in 2006 against the opposition of powerful conservation organisations and the Indian forest bureaucracy, which had presided over a 'wave of evictions' since 2002, which displaced as many as 300,000 forest dwellers from their homes as part of 'urgent measures to

combat deforestation and protect the remaining tree cover' (*ibid.*: 221–22). In spite of the FRA's provisions, the IFA has remained in force, as has the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act, 'which reserved large areas of land for wilderness, allowing for little to no human presence' (*ibid.*).

This has created a tenuous legal balance. According to data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, as of April 2019 nearly 4.1 million **individual** forest rights claims had been lodged across India (of which 46 per cent led to land titles) and 148,818 **community** forest rights claims (of which 51 per cent led to land titles). Still, progress was judged as too slow in 2016 by a committee appointed to assess the implementation of the FRA, with state governments and local authorities often holding up the processing of rights claims and distribution of land titles (Newslick 2019).

Recently, the FRA has been threatened with complete dismantlement following legal action brought by conservationists and forest bureaucrats. Two rulings by the Supreme Court of India, in January 2016 and February 2019, ordered the eviction of rejected FRA claimants. However, the enforcement of both eviction orders was indefinitely stayed (Campaign for Survival and Dignity 2019). Rather than directly questioning the rights the FRA granted to STs, the petitioners – a coalition of wildlife activists, conservation-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and retired forest officials – alleged that the FRA had enabled 'bogus claimants' to gain land and destroy India's forests.

The Supreme Court rulings stipulated that forest dwellers whose claims had been rejected – usually, in practice, by local councils dominated by non-Adivasis or forest officials – should be evicted. This would have displaced over 9 million people. After nationwide protests, an enumeration exercise to assess the reasons for claims having been rejected was launched.¹² As of mid-2020, with a final decision by the Supreme Court still pending, the status of the FRA and those whose rights it was designed to protect remains in limbo (Löw 2020).

The political climate for Adivasi (and Dalit) communities has also worsened significantly under the right-wing Hindutva-inspired regime of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014. Modi and the BJP were re-elected in May 2019 with a large majority. The BJP is part of a larger family of Hindu nationalist organisations, the Sangh Parivar, spawned by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a paramilitary volunteer organisation that draws inspiration from figures such as Adolf Hitler, which aims to remodel secular India as a culturally and religiously homogeneous *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation).

Physical attacks on Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, other minority groups and women have increased since 2014. They have included public lynchings undertaken by mobs animated by BJP affiliates, whose victims are often members of marginalised communities, particularly Muslims and Dalits accused of having eaten or sold beef (Gowen and Sharma 2018).¹³ In a climate of shrinking civil society space, Indian security forces have gratuitously used anti-terrorism charges such as 'sedition' and 'anti-national activity', which can carry whole-life prison sentences, to intimidate activists and dissenters (*cf.* Human Rights Watch 2016). At the time of writing (January 2021), one of the members of the research team whose work made this study possible

had been imprisoned for more than nine months, facing vague and spurious charges related to protests against the regime's policies.

Adivasis' responses to the shrinking political and civic space in India have comprised both greater assertions of political autonomy and defence of existing citizenship rights. Some Adivasi villages in Jharkhand in 2018 began erecting *Pathalgadi* (large stone plaques and signboards) proclaiming local autonomy and forbidding outsiders and security forces from entering their territory, and holding demonstrations armed with traditional weapons, such as bows and arrows (Tewari 2018).

The Pathalgadi movement combines references to legal provisions for local self-government under the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act (1996), which are inscribed on the plaques, with tribal traditions of erecting stones in memory of the community's ancestral spirits, as territorial markers.¹⁴ Adivasis have also been at the forefront of protests in Delhi and various state capitals to uphold the FRA, some of which members of The Programme have helped to organise. Adivasi groups and individuals have continued to make forest rights claims under the FRA, although in vastly reduced numbers: only 20,847 new individual and 525 collective claims were made between January 2019 and January 2020.¹⁵

2.4 The role of spirituality in Adivasis' struggles

Questions of culture and identity are and have been central to Adivasis' struggles against displacement and for land rights, which, in turn, have been 'constituted by and constitutive of' Adivasi identity (Kjosavik 2010: 249). But how does spirituality, specifically, feature within these land struggles? The rest of this chapter will explore this in detail in the specific case of The Programme, but not before gleaning four summary takeaways from the literature.

First, Adivasis intimately associate their origins and ways of living with the forests of India. As Kujur (2001: 16) puts it: 'Land is central to the tribes' existence. Without land they simply do not exist. In absence of land there is no space for their social, cultural, economic and ecological life.' The forest, hence, is a sacred resource. As Borde (2019: 554) highlights, thanks to the identification of forest land as sacred, 'Adivasi religiosity as a whole is gaining a platform from which [the Adivasi movement] can voice demands for politico-legal recognition.'

Second, this Adivasi attachment to land or forest(s) is not abstract, but an attachment to 'their' own unique land and forest, and the struggle for land constitutes a 'concrete politics of place' (Kjosavik 2010: 252), which assigns significance to sites and territories. As one Dongria Kondh Adivasi, quoted by Krishnan and Naga (2017: 884), explains: 'We can live only because of our mountain. He is our God. We worship him.' Adivasi belief systems, as documented by scholarship, locate ancestral spirits in features of the land, which makes their connection to the spiritual realm unalterably place bound and territorial.

Anthropological evidence suggests that tribal spirituality (as documented in central-Western India) undergirds an intricate 'territorial system' of agreements between tribes, watched over by a 'territorial god' and administered by shamanic individuals (*Budwanta*) who coordinate 'with deities, souls, justice system, and community members'

(Mahendra Kumar 2018: 8). Each village has a territorial god, living ‘at its geographical boundary’, who ‘protects and looks over the region’ (Narendra 2017). As Kujur (2001: 22) says, ‘the world of the ancestors’ is understood by Adivasis as ‘copenetrating’ with the visible world; hence, ancestors are ‘not thought of as living in far away places, since they dwell in the huts of their nearest relatives, in streams, rivulets, fields, and mountains of their villages’. This creates in Adivasis a ‘longing for land... not only for their physical existence but also for their encounter with the supernatural forces’ (*ibid.*: 13, 23).

Third, the spirituality motivating land struggles is a **non-Hindu** spirituality. Innately, among Adivasis, it is felt that ‘tribal culture will remain unique and independent’ only by distancing itself from ‘Brahmanical practices as far as birth, death, marriage and rituals are concerned’ (Mahendra Kumar 2018: 6–7). This differentiation from Hinduism is also a practical, strategic one: scholars and other observers have noted how ‘[a]sserting an indigenous identity by naturalising the connection between Adivasis and their environment was a powerful way of claiming sovereign rights to natural resources’ (Baviskar 2005: 5109). Such framings of ‘Adivasis as nature’s conservators’ may even increasingly require them ‘to “perform” the roles ascribed to them’, for instance through engaging in overtly public and photogenic displays of reverence for the spiritual value of the forest (Krishnan and Naga 2017: 887).

Faced with expectations of being “ecologically noble savages” (or increasingly, not savages at all, but savants), Adivasis hence may ‘perform’ spirituality, at times ‘self-consciously (and sometimes, with irony) [and] pandering to hegemonic cultural expectations in order to gain their own ends’ (Baviskar 2005: 5110). Some studies have suggested that the ‘re-articulation of Adivasi identities’ as more spiritual, ecological and territorially attached ‘micro-identities’ – i.e. small tribes attached to specific locales (Kjosavik 2010: 245) – has been more successful than other ‘politics of representation’ based on, for instance, citizenship rights or economic needs (Krishnan and Naga 2017: 893).

The FRA, which privileges indigeneity as a source of legal rights, in effect even requires applicants to demonstrate their entitlement via performances of: ‘a somewhat exotic culture, of spirituality and primordial bonds with “nature”, for an audience which demands precisely that. Practices which “seem to be tribal” are showcased, in the process embellishing, amplifying and even inventing culture’ (Krishnan and Naga 2017: 888). At the same time, showcasing ‘Adivasi-ness’ also helps activists visibly differentiate indigenous assertion from Naxalism and more opportunistic demands for resource redistribution, both of which engender more hostile responses from authorities and local elites.

Fourth, and finally, how spirituality informs Adivasi struggles in practice is not pre-determined or automatic, but malleable. To recognise the malleability is not to imply anything ‘cynical, opportunistic, inauthentic’ (Baviskar 2005: 5110),¹⁶ but rather to acknowledge the choice and agency in Adivasi self-assertion. This indeterminacy is perhaps best illustrated by cases that fail to fit the established mould; for instance, as Krishnan and Naga (2017: 886, 889) report, some Kutia Kondh Adivasi articulated their resistance to a mining project as ‘farmers and fisher-people’ who deserved

compensation for their lost livelihoods, rather than outright rejection. But the demands of other tribes, who emphasised a more 'primordial, spiritual connection with nature', were ultimately privileged by media reporting and judicial rulings, and were accorded greater protection from the mining project's harms.

In other cases, as Baviskar (2005) finds, Adivasi activists have formed electoral alliances with Hindu supremacists, founded on shared (but qualitatively different) claims to indigeneity in opposition to a 'hated Other'. Hindu supremacists' claims to indigeneity are about erasing centuries of Muslim and Christian presence on the subcontinent, whose presence irks them more than that of Adivasis, whom they casually treat as 'default Hindus' or 'backward Hindus' (*ibid.*: 5107):

On most counts, the claims to indigeneity made by the Hindu Right are starkly different from the claims to indigeneity made by Adivasis fighting against displacement by a large dam. Hindu indigeneity legitimises the violent exclusion and subordination of religious minorities... Yet there is one disturbing common element in these widely divergent invocations of indigeneity... The assertion of cultural ties to land.
(*ibid.*: 5110)

This sketch has established and explored the importance of identity and the role of spirituality in Adivasi land struggles. The next sections, in which The Programme is introduced and evaluated, will explore more how innate spirituality is used **strategically** to enable land struggles and self-empowerment.

3 Description of The Programme

In order to assess how spiritual-religious practices ideologically galvanise Adivasis for action and practically help to mitigate threats and overcome resistance, this section and the next will re-analyse qualitative data collected through a comprehensive evaluation. The bulk of data was collected in workshops, interviews and visits to multiple villages during a period of intensive field research undertaken by a team of researchers (a lead researcher, a research assistant and an agricultural expert).

The Programme's methods have never previously been evaluated or scrutinised in published research. To protect the identities of persons involved and avoid divulging information that could be used against The Programme and its members, extensive steps for anonymisation have been taken. No locations, dates or names are disclosed. Some of The Programme's attributes and methods are described only in very general terms.

3.1 Background, reach and general features

The movement referred to here as The Programme encompasses more than 100,000 members and their families living across India's Tribal Belt. It is just one small initiative (or linked set of activities) on the sprawling tapestry of subaltern politics, mobilisation, self-assertion and rights-claiming in India (*cf.* Nilsen 2018a: 4–7). The activists working in The Programme explicitly and exclusively target people who live in rural areas, own no

land and are held in debt bondage by local elites – some of the poorest and most oppressed people in India. The overwhelming majority of members are Adivasis, but a smaller number are Dalits and an even smaller number are Siddis (Indians of African descent). The focus in this chapter is on The Programme's work with Adivasis.

People who join The Programme are accompanied by an animator, who initially assists them in forming a group with like-minded neighbours. Animators are mostly, though not all, recruited from the member base itself. They are selected based on experience, motivation and natural leadership skills. They work under the aegis of local NGOs. Prospective members typically live in conditions of extreme disempowerment, as bonded labourers, when they are first approached by The Programme's animators (or when, in some cases, they approach animators after having become aware of nearby groups' activities).

Bonded labourers are unfree workers held in a personal (rather than impersonal capitalist) patron-client relationship that contains elements of both oppression and mutuality, but which is undergirded, if necessary, by naked force (Lerche 1995: 487–88). Being held in debt forces them to work for near-starvation wages, usually performing fieldwork for the local landowner, to whom they owe money and who is their only or primary source of income. This income will never suffice to repay the debt. The landowners often also own, or have *de facto* control over, the labourers' sites of residence. Having practically no assets or alternative income-earning options, any extraordinary expense, such as a medical bill or urgent travel, inexorably leads bonded labourers deeper into debt. These facts make them economically completely dependent on – hence, bonded to – employer-creditor landlords.

The self-empowerment process bonded labourers go through with The Programme is uncertain and inherently fraught with conflict with both their 'patron' and other authorities. According to animators' estimates, it typically takes 10–15 years for members to become fully and sustainably self-sufficient, with land of their own, though not all groups are ultimately able to complete this process. The process also involves a variety of legal instruments and intricate steps of organisation-building (which are left out of this discussion, in order to focus on aspects of spirituality and not divulge details which could endanger The Programme's work).

The Programme traces its origins back to the 1980s, when labour struggles led to Supreme Court judgments that not only ordered the release of bonded labourers who (under previous legislation) had not been correctly identified as bonded, but also accorded compensation and rehabilitation to freed labourers (Xaxa 2007: 31–39). Various approaches and phases of experimentation led to The Programme's current combination of methods, applied in this form since roughly the mid-2000s, when the connection with traditional cultural-spiritual practices and the emphasis on non-market, subsistence-oriented livelihood strategies became central. This focus on self-sufficiency and self-identification **as Adivasis**, we were told, emerged out of conversations with elders, who saw it as offering alternative pathways away from both markets/'modernity' **and** Naxalite Maoism, at a time when struggles between the Maoists and the Indian state were flaring up across the Tribal Belt and new programmes of market

inclusion (particularly microcredit) targeted marginal populations. As one of its founders explained to us: 'The Maoists were showing guns as a way, we began showing the *mandar* [traditional drum] as the way.'

3.2 Goals and methods

The Programme's overarching aim is for people to lead self-determined lives, free of bondage and exploitation. In this chapter, the process towards this is referred to as 'self-empowerment', a term which inevitably understates the significance of things such as escaping multigenerational debt bondage or gaining a secure home, but avoids the hyperbole of terms such as liberation or emancipation. The key goalposts of this self-empowerment process are freedom from debt bondage and obtaining land titles. Land is the principal source of economic and social power in rural India, and being able to inhabit and farm one's own land (as a group) is understood to be the prerequisite for Adivasis gaining and maintaining their economic self-sufficiency and cultural independence.

When a new group is formed, the first goal is financial: to build up savings to overcome debt bondage. The Programme's animators talk to and quietly organise a small cadre of leaders who gradually bring neighbours together to meet at regular intervals. The group discusses collective problems and collects small amounts of cash and grain, to build up a collective savings fund, from which members can borrow when facing hardship. As the fund gradually grows, groups become less dependent on employer-creditor landlords, can collectively bargain for better terms of work and eventually completely repudiate debt altogether. In effect, the collective fund enables groups to escape usurious debts by never repaying them. Members are also instructed to stay away from other forms of debt, such as microcredit.

Once groups escape bondage, they can set their sights on a higher goal: to gain their own land, which they pursue through several steps.¹⁷ First, they identify some nearby land, usually forest or government-owned 'waste' land, which is suitable for farming. When the group feels sufficiently strong, it begins to encroach upon the land by clearing vegetation (usually enough acreage to feed the members' families) and planting agricultural crops. Cultural and spiritual symbols such as sacred stones are erected or identified and marked on the land. Group members may build temporary structures, primarily to serve as meeting places, even before they own the land.

When local authorities and dominant caste-Hindu actors become aware of the encroachment, they usually respond with hostility. They issue threats; physically attack encroachers; let their cattle run through crops; call the police or other authorities to evict them; or lodge competing claims of ownership. Members of The Programme are forced to defend the land, sometimes using physical force or counter-threats, and may call upon other groups from surrounding areas to help them keep their opponents at bay.

Second, The Programme helps groups submit a legal land rights claim, under the FRA, to local authorities, which are often wary and hostile. Claims may be held up for years by *gram panchayats* (village councils), which are commonly dominated by caste-Hindu landowning groups, and which may refuse to process a claim. In such cases, groups can exert pressure by organising demonstrations, lobbying higher-up officials, lodging legal

cases to break the deadlock, or getting their own members elected to the *panchayat*. Groups can also work together and mobilise collectively to expedite several land rights claims held up in different villages by taking their cases to politicians in the district headquarter or state capital city.

For an FRA land rights claim to succeed, it is crucial that the claimants be recognised as claiming ancestral land. Visible signs of indigeneity and place-boundness are important and can include spiritual sites and markers on the land, engaging in cultural practices that are ‘typical’ for Adivasis and farming the land in traditional ways. From what we learned, it matters less that claimants claim land they currently live on than that they can demonstrate they are already exercising rights to the forest (i.e. subsisting from the land) and that their ancestors had a claim to it.

Third, when groups finally gain land tenure or anticipate gaining it (even after the claim has been approved, the handing-out of titles may be delayed for years), group members begin to move their families onto the new/regained land, build permanent dwellings, and apply for amenities such as water and electricity. As, in effect, a new village consolidates, The Programme’s animators gradually reduce their support, but remain in contact with the newly independent group. The Programme places a strong emphasis on groups continuing to hold regular meetings, to maintain their capacity for collective action. It ensures land titles are issued as documents of collective ownership, in order to prevent individual members selling or mortgaging land, falling back into debt, or drifting towards market-oriented agriculture.

Beyond enabling freedom from bondage and rights to land, The Programme has a number of secondary goals, which are themselves seen as important parts of the self-empowerment process:

- 1 **Food sovereignty** is a precondition for the process. Groups’ savings of cash and grain initially enable them to break the cycle of economic dependency on landlords. Growing their own crops is the next step towards full self-sufficiency. Along the way, accessing government food transfers and income-generating schemes helps (see point 3).
- 2 **Agroecology** and subsistence-oriented farming are heavily emphasised. The animators ensure groups plant traditional, indigenous seeds, which are seen as more robust and beneficial than commercial ones. Rejecting commercial seeds, fertilisers and irrigation means members can avoid paying exploitative prices or indebting themselves for farming inputs. The use of traditional seeds and methods also demonstrably underscores members’ indigeneity. However, low yields and harder work may be a price paid for keeping farming traditional and simple.¹⁸
- 3 **Access to welfare:** The Programme assists its members with gaining identity cards and registering for state welfare programmes. The Indian government has a variety of welfare and subsidy schemes, but lack of documentation and other barriers can prevent poor people from accessing them. Particularly in the early stages, before members harvest their own crops, government rice distribution systems, health services and employment schemes (especially the massive NREGA¹⁹ public works programme) enable greater independence from landlords.

- The Programme also has a diffuse emphasis on **gender equality**. Groups are always mixed gender, and leadership is generally shared by men and women. Gender equality is pursued less through deliberate interventions and instead seen as an inevitable result of restoring traditional Adivasi values and ways, which typically entail men sharing housework and women participating equally in community life. Debt bondage and exposure to Hinduism are seen (within The Programme) as the primary causes of gender-based inequality and violence. While it is true that there is 'relative gender equality' in Adivasi societies and women enjoy greater levels of 'social, sexual and economic freedom' than in caste-Hindu and Muslim communities (Shah 2018: 31f),²⁰ the assumption that improvements in gender relations will automatically follow from a return to tradition may prevent The Programme's animators addressing residual or unrecognised gender inequalities. In our workshops, questions about more active measures for women's empowerment were generally dismissed. It was noticeable that male animators spoke disproportionately.

3.3 Security and secrecy

The Programme's activities confront the entrenched power of landlords and what Nilsen (2018a: 29ff) calls the 'everyday tyranny' of local elites and authorities, whose extraction of bribes and tribute payments deepen Adivasis' subordination. When challenged, these power-holders inevitably react. The Programme has always faced threats of backlash and opposition at local level, coming from various sides, depending on local context, including landlords-cum-creditors, government officials, the armed Indian Forest Service (unofficially often known as the Forest Department), police, army, mining companies, moneylenders and microfinance institutions (MFIs),²¹ Hindutva activists, upper-caste groups, traders, and politicians.

In the research process, many animators and members we met told us harrowing stories of run-ins with law enforcement agencies and violent thugs linked to landlords and local elites, and sometimes showed us physical scars. One animator had survived three attempts on his life. Another told us: 'Four of us, we were caught and locked in a room once, only when more people from the neighbouring groups came to rescue us, the landlords got scared.'²² Another said: 'When one village leader came to help us to reach out to more bonded labourers, he was shot dead in 2016 by the landlord's *goondas* [hired thugs].' Others explained that MFIs (which are often run or staffed by members of the landlord class) routinely target The Programme's savings groups with loans, and when rebuffed, often threaten to attack animators or pull strings to have members' government benefits revoked. Others told us about villages in conservation areas where forest officials had deliberately released tigers and elephants to scare the residents into leaving: 'We have refused to vacate, we have told forest officials let the animals eat us, we will die but not leave the land.'

During a research team visit organised by leaders of The Programme,²³ we witnessed an arson attack perpetrated by local elites against an Adivasi group, residents of a tiny village²⁴ who had only joined The Programme several months prior to our visit. Representatives of the local landlord somehow became aware of our presence and dispatched a team of people to

intimidate 'his' bonded workers and chase us outsiders away. The landlord's men threatened those present and started a fire nearby, fuelling the flames to spread them to the village. The research team was forced to flee.

Three families' huts were burnt to the ground, and their residents lost their shelter and their belongings. Five young Adivasis were injured in an ensuing violent altercation with the landlord's agents. The Programme's local animators called the police, who dispatched officers to camp out overnight and temporarily ensure safety and order. The animators filed a 'caste-based atrocity' report, to be prosecuted in court. The same village had already suffered an arson attack a few months earlier.

The Programme has more recently grappled with the closing civic space across India. Like a growing number of authoritarian governments, the current BJP government has particularly targeted human rights groups, social movements and organisations of marginalised people, and foreign-funded civil society organisations (*cf.* Hossain *et al.* 2018). Adivasis' and other marginalised groups' self-assertions are not only a political and economic challenge to entrenched rural power structures and systems of exploitation, but are also seen as a cultural challenge by the increasingly radicalised Hindutva movement. As a result, organisations supporting Adivasis are subject to surveillance efforts and obstruction, including observation by national intelligence services.

The Programme and its members have responded by further lowering their already low profile. Without an apex organisation or a country-wide name, the organisational form is amorphous and opaque. The organisations and groups that comprise it are genuinely autonomous, although they may undertake coordinated actions when needed. Other self-assertion movements by Adivasis have aimed for public visibility and symbolic victories – there being a sense, in some cases, that the 'success of [the] struggle was the struggle itself' (Kunhaman 2003, cited in Kjosavik 2010: 258) – whereas The Programme's achievements are not advertised. Symbolic victories are discounted, while less-visible practical achievements are preferred. The success of The Programme's methods depends partly on the methods not being fully understood and its successes potentially not being fully recognised by its adversaries. The activities on the ground are, as much as possible, presented as or allowed to look like spontaneous acts of self-empowerment by groups of Adivasis (or Dalits or Siddis), rather than outcomes of a concerted programme. This may be as much about minimising The Programme's exposure as about reinforcing members' sense of **self**-empowerment.

The Programme's animators, who mostly come from the target communities, can blend into the local social tapestry, and travel inconspicuously on foot, bicycle or motorbike. Larger gatherings are avoided altogether or are planned to coincide with cultural festivals or religious ceremonies, which they blend into. Some activities that entail greater formal visibility, such as pursuing court cases or high-level lobbying, are handed over to like-minded organisations.

Representatives of The Programme also cultivate, as much as possible, positive relationships with power-holders, such as higher political or bureaucratic office-holders (who may be called upon for protection and assistance) or, in some regions, even with Naxalite rebel groups.²⁵ Despite

the overall efficacy of these tactics, however, there have been situations that have led The Programme to temporarily withdraw from an area due to intolerably high threats to its animators' and members' lives.

4 The Programme's strategic use of spirituality

4.1 How does The Programme animate Adivasi spirituality?

The exact form of the spiritual 'reconnection', as we learned from our interviews and discussions with animators, depends on the local circumstances and reflects Adivasis' widely differing tribal identities and practices. It is usually rekindled by a small number of people to start with and gradually the whole community joins in. In some cases, traditional spiritual practices are still alive, or can be recovered from members' living memories or neighbouring groups. Groups seeking spiritual reconnection may visit other villages or attend larger events at which traditions are celebrated. The Programme's wide reach also means that important artefacts and objects – from the hand-crafted *mandar* drum,²⁶ which is essential to many Adivasis' rituals, to traditional seed varieties – can be obtained and exchanged within its networks.

In other cases, like the Adivasi populations in India's northeastern states, who were uprooted from central India more than a century ago and brought to Assam as bonded tea plantation workers, key traditions have been lost or forgotten. In these cases, animators launch a process of rediscovery in discussion with community elders, analysing the community's documented history, and searching for physical clues or evidence in the vicinity and among the group's possessions. During our research, we were astonished to learn how Siddi groups – whose forebears were transported to India from East Africa several hundred years ago as slaves – had rediscovered spiritual traditions and found their 'old gods' through a combination of community-based explorations and archival research led by an NGO. At one key moment, 'folk songs took them back to a river in Mozambique', we were told.

Notwithstanding the wide diversity of traditions and spiritual practices, our field visits and interactions with animators revealed a core set of traditions and practices that, at least for Adivasis, typically play a major role in The Programme's work.

- **Drumming and dancing:** many Adivasi rites involve rhythmic drumming accompanied by hymns and dancing, which can lead one or more members into trance. This trance is seen as a way for the community to communicate with the spiritual realm.²⁷ After groups have begun spiritual reconnection, they usually accompany their formal meetings with a religious ceremony, led by (if available) traditional priests or healers, and playing the *mandar*. Aside from being open to all members, and visibly spreading joy among the participants, singing and trance reinforce ethno-cultural identity. As we saw, these also very practically allow leaders and animators to introduce agenda-setting messages or remind members of collective duties, in the guise of hymns. For instance, we observed an animator chanting this line repeatedly: 'We must meet every week, we must build the organisation [*sangathan*].'

- **Priests and healers:** having a priest or healer is part of cultural self-assertion, and creates a personalised office that embodies authority and enables otherwise highly egalitarian tribal societies to reach decisions for action more effectively. It can also promote gender equality, as women can be priests, too, and are seen as having complementary – and in some domains superior – spiritual knowledge (cf. Borde 2019). In the areas we visited, we learned that male priests lead religious ceremonies (and play the *mandar*), but a woman priest is seen as equally important and ceremonies cannot take place without her. Dancing, singing and going into trance visibly involve women and men equally. Both genders dance together.
- **Recognition of traditional gods and spirits:** in Adivasi culture (as noted in section 2) gods and spirits are often bound up with particular territories and demarcate them, to the extent that they have been termed ‘territorial gods’ (cf. Mahendra Kumar 2018). They manifest in particular features of the land, often stones, and can be located and ‘rediscovered’ on forest land, motivating community members to encroach it. Documenting the presence of an indigenous community’s territorial god and ancestral spirits, in turn, supports its FRA land rights claim.
- **Production and consumption of particular foods:** consuming forest products such as tubers and berries, hunting small game, and eating beef all differentiate Adivasis (as well as Dalits, who eat beef, too) from mainstream/upper-caste Hindu society, where such foods are culturally proscribed as ‘impure’. Designating particular foods as part of Adivasi/Dalit heritage underscores the claim and sense of being culturally different. Making use of the forest for hunting and gathering in turn reinforces land claims, both intrinsically and extrinsically.
- **Consumption and production of alcohol:** Adivasis across India produce and consume artisanal alcohol made from forest products, most famously *mahua* wine, distilled from *mahua* tree flowers. By contrast, alcohol consumption is disavowed by many high-caste Hindus (and Muslims) – at least officially. Adivasis often celebrate the consumption of homemade alcohol as part of their cultural heritage and spiritual life (Begrich 2013).²⁸ At meetings of Adivasi groups that had participated in The Programme for at least several years, we were always warmly welcomed with *mahua* or other homemade alcoholic drinks. As one animator told us: ‘You will know that a village is part [of us] if people greet you saying *Jai Johar*²⁹ and if you get *mahua*.’

These spiritual elements of The Programme, which emphasise rediscovery and celebration of Adivasi traditions, are used consciously and deliberately to drive the self-empowerment process.

First, to state the potentially obvious, although it may be hard for outsiders or non-believers – such as this author – to fully comprehend, spiritual practices have effects on Adivasis which they experience at a spiritual-religious level. They contribute to motivation to undertake particular struggles, especially for land, and to persist when encountering resistance, as was described to us by animators using expressions such as ‘giving strength’, offering ‘divine protection’ and facilitating ‘healing’.

Shared spirituality helps to build a sense of collective solidarity and mark Adivasis out as non-Hindus. It reinforces Adivasis' distinctness, giving them pride in a separate identity, and moving them out of the subordinated and stigmatised spiritual position in the Hindu caste hierarchy, which many are likely to have internalised (Baviskar 2005; Nilsen 2018a: 43ff). Gaining a more positive sense of self in this way implies a significant positive psychosocial impact *per se*, while also practically reinforcing attachment to land and forests. Moreover, in being less masculinist than Hinduism, Adivasi spirituality may particularly empower women and create greater equality within groups.

Second, and from the perspective of outsiders easier to comprehend and describe, The Programme's reconnection of Adivasis with their traditional spirituality promotes and protects specific practical aspects of the self-empowerment process, as discussed below. It publicly legitimises claims for rights, especially land, because the FRA privileges claimants who can demonstrate 'traditional' tenure. It also helps to visibly differentiate The Programme's activities from 'godless' Naxalism or other forms of political assertion that elites may see as more threatening. Instead of organising protests, spiritually reconnected Adivasi groups can organise religious festivals, which are less likely to be attacked, yet which also present opportunities to liaise with high-ranking officials and politicians about 'political' issues.

4.2 How does spirituality support specific aspects of the self-empowerment process?

Spirituality, as laid out here, plays a central role in the self-empowerment process animated by The Programme. It cannot be reduced to a feature or a method, but rather is a strategy that permeates many aspects to varying degrees, though not all (e.g. the savings activities launched in the early stages of self-empowerment are largely 'secular'). The Programme's **strategic** use of spirituality is most clearly visible in three domains: providing motivation and ideology; helping construct an indigenous identity for securing rights; and offering protection and disguise. Although these three are interconnected in practice, they can be distinguished here for purposes of explanation and illustration.

4.2.1 Providing motivation and ideology

The Programme's animators explained to us a number of its different components – such as acting collectively as a 'tribal' unit, engaging in agroecological farming, and seeking land rights – as reflecting innate features of Adivasi identity and spirituality. The use of indigenous seeds and traditional farming methods are articulated as assertions of a more 'natural' and nature-respecting Adivasi way of life (while also being presented by The Programme's leaders as excellent adaptations to anthropogenic climate change). Similarly, land rights struggles are motivated by the deep-seated Adivasi attachment to the forest and its products, and the belief in the unique spiritual value of specific places – the 'territorial god' – in particular. Groups' egalitarian, collective inclusiveness (including relative gender equality) is also understood as reflecting innate tribal norms and a

return to the ways of the spiritual ancestors. Groups are animated to decide things by consensus, farm collectively, share produce equally and so on.

The cultural and spiritual reconnection facilitated by The Programme thus helps to reinforce the more worldly goals of The Programme, as well as differentiating its participants from other parts of Indian society. It underscores a positive, alternative sense of identity – as Adivasi, Dalit or Siddi people, respectively, with their own cultures – that members can valorise. This enables them to reject Hinduism (as much a religious belief system as a set of moral-social codes that assign higher or lower positions in society) and to counteract increasingly aggressive Hinduisation efforts aimed at bringing non-Hindus into the fold. The veneration of their separate culture and spirituality gives Adivasis, who are often stigmatised as ‘backward’ or ‘savage’, an ideological support structure for their self-assertion **as** Adivasis, in much the same way as appeals to class consciousness may do for other political movements.³⁰

No doubt these essentialisations could, in other scenarios, amount to caricaturing Adivasi culture. Yet, in the context of The Programme, they crucially enable Adivasis to challenge extremely negative alternative essentialisations – as backward people, inebriates, sub-Hindus and so on – and equip themselves with a more positive and agentic sense of self. In the face of overwhelming traditional power wielded by landowning Hindu groups, spirituality furnishes members of The Programme with a sense of confidence, unity and healing.

This ideological-motivational potency of spirituality was vividly demonstrated to the research team in the aftermath of the arson attack described above. In a disturbing scene in a workshop the next day, a female animator collapsed and writhed on the floor, screaming that she could feel the fire which burnt down the huts on her own body, that she was burning, and that she was very scared and unable to cope with her fear. Her colleagues determined that she was ‘possessed’ by spirits. The eldest healer among the group gathered other animators around and began assuaging the spirits with a hymnic declaration that, with the power of god, ‘our people will come out of bondage, but only if we strengthen our spiritual connection, only if we respect our forest and lands’. The animators chanted and sang songs until her breakdown subsided. After a break, the meeting was able to turn to questions of strategy, specifically how to respond to the arson attack. Both the individual animator’s spiritual experience and the assembly’s collective spiritual response visibly strengthened the animators’ resolve on that day.

4.2.2 Constructing indigeneity for rights claims

The FRA, which was designed to give ownership to people who have ancestral land claims, is the central legal instrument through which groups participating in The Programme can currently obtain land titles. Groups’ cultural and spiritual ‘reconnection’ via religious rituals and their demarcation of religious symbols, such as boundary stones, makes their ‘Adivasi-ness’ visible and buttresses their claims as indigenous owners of the land. Leaders of The Programme explained to us that the enabling role of spirituality in FRA claims was initially ‘co-incident’, but it has increasingly become a centrepiece in their land rights strategy.³¹

Groups' claims to traditional ownership are strengthened by their use of indigenous, non-commercial seeds and farming methods. Arguably, therefore, agroecological farming is first and foremost an enabler of land ownership, rather than land ownership enabling farming. This seemingly paradoxical relationship – farming first, land second – makes sense in three ways. First, by not needing expensive inputs, agroecology is an affordable, low-risk – though also potentially low-yield – way to grow food, which members can undertake as soon as they begin to encroach on land: they need no further resources.³² Second, when groups engage in farming that is visibly different from that in surrounding communities, it helps to underscore their 'Adivasi-ness' (Oskarsson and Sareen 2020), which strengthens their FRA application. Third, The Programme's leaders expect subsistence-oriented agroecology to counteract the draw of market forces. Adivasis who farm only for their own subsistence using non-commercial (or not commercially viable) crops are seen as at a lower risk of losing land or falling back into exploitative relationships with 'outsiders'.

As a research team, we repeatedly asked about how the commitment to agroecological methods is imbedded in members, and were surprised to find that neither members nor animators seemed to believe any sensitisation or convincing to be necessary. This suggests it is an attitude that may, perhaps, be reinforced by The Programme, but genuinely prefigures it. When questioned, members and animators forcefully argued that agroecology³³ was superior to other forms of farming in various ways. Both ordinary members and animators insisted that agroecology had only advantages and no disadvantages, and pointed us to various nutritional or health benefits (which we could not objectively verify). They claimed that mainstream seed varieties ('government rice', 'hybrid') were bad for people's health.

As one member, who had participated in a government-run agricultural training scheme, said: 'Farming is easy; we just follow the ways of our elders. We didn't learn anything in particular [from government training] last year, but we got various [traditional] seeds.' They also explained that agroecological subsistence farming reflects the cultural and spiritual norms of their community. As various members told us, agroecology uses 'old leaders' traditional knowledge' in order 'to secure the territorial spirit'. Animators portrayed it as restoring sovereignty and dignity via control over their own natural resources:

Adivasi culture and agriculture is not for earning money or more income, Adivasis want to live.

Adivasi[s] used to be in the forests, but during colonialism they introduced all these laws which made it difficult for Adivasis to access the forests and products, hence we have to evolve and do agriculture, but this agriculture has to be done in the Adivasi way.

Sowing the crops is also accompanied by religious activities: 'After putting seeds, we notified that this is our land. We did the worship on our land. We take care of the crops, did a *Puja* and notified [the authorities of our presence].'

4.2.3 Offering protection and disguise

An increasingly important strategic purpose of spirituality in The Programme is to package its members' activities so that they appear less threatening and are harder to suppress, at least under existing Indian legislation, which protects heterogeneous forms of religious expression (a fact the BJP seeks to change). At a practical level, The Programme's cultural-spiritual messaging helps to visibly dissociate its activities from Naxalite activities. While it is not known to what extent any of The Programme's members and animators sympathise with the Naxalite (and Pathalgadi) movements' aims, they have evidently disavowed such insurgent, confrontational methods.

Animators explained how spiritual activity was, at times, a deliberate tactic: 'If they call us Naxalites, we do a gathering of healers and put *Deuta* and *mandar* [god and drum] in the front'; 'When we celebrate a religious festival and invite officials, they can't brand us easily as Maoists.' In one instance, during our visit to a village, we met with members on their encroached land. They showed us their traditional weaponry. Animators quickly intervened and reminded the group that, if authorities were to suddenly arrive, this weaponry could incriminate the group and the meeting. The bows and arrows were quickly removed and deposited some distance away, by a small shrine deeper in the forest, where they in effect became 'cultural artefacts'.

Large cultural-religious festivals and events, organised to celebrate Adivasi culture and spirituality, can also serve as a non-confrontational platform for meetings with government authorities and to build relationships. Officially, such regional-scale festivals are of a cultural and religious nature, focused on singing, dancing, eating and drinking. State- and district-level politicians, government officials and media are invited; and because several thousand Adivasis (all potential voters) from as many as 100 villages may attend, officials and politicians can hardly ignore or refuse the invitation. They are fêted as guests of honour and invited to partake in the celebrations, while also being indirectly shown members' organisational strength, and petitioned with requests for support, which they are usually obliged to respond to with assurances or promises. As animators told us in the workshops, the religious festivals' messaging is successful on multiple levels:

The invitation card with our organisation's name³⁴ is our strength. Because we are a big organisation, they listen to us, we negotiate, we go to them, we tell them why we are inviting them, how it will also benefit them.

The MLAs [Members of State Legislative Assembly] or officials who come become 'our' people, we make them sing and dance with us, they eat our food and drink mahua, we give them Bura Deuta's blessings too.

Through these festivals, the state comes to know that we are organised, they get to know that we are strong.

*When we did not do such festivals, our identity was not known. Now everyone knows about us: government, TV channels, and general public has come to know about our Adivasi culture, our gods, our issues.*³⁵

Animators and members shared examples of such rallies having led to greater respect; being given priority in administrative offices; officials becoming more pliable; police arrests and harassment by Indian Forest Service officials declining; and good relationships with authorities at higher levels having helped overcome unresponsive or unsympathetic lower-ranking officials.

Smaller festivals may also be organised at the local level, often not to impress or to make demands, but rather to respond to localised threats. For instance, if a group faces imminent eviction from a piece of encroached land, a small event may be organised, bringing together 100 or more people from groups in the local area, making removal of the encroaching group more difficult. Singing, dancing, food and drink change the nature and optics of the situation. It is much more difficult for police to justify an attack on a 'religious' gathering than the arrest of participants in a demonstration organised by purported Naxalite sympathisers.

Officially, the NGOs that constitute The Programme no longer engage in 'advocacy', instead using different labels for any sort of political engagement. The Programme's efforts at selective and strategic visibility – with its members manifesting, as circumstances require, sometimes as savings groups, as religious devotees or cultural celebrators, and only rarely as protesters or petitioners – have been instrumental to its survival and continued success, despite the increasingly hostile post-2014 environment. Throughout our workshops and site visits, animators and members reiterated the value of having cultural-spiritual platforms on which to liaise with authorities and defend claims to rights. As one animator explained: 'Even the constitution says we cannot be thrown out of our lands if there is spiritual and cultural connection, and the police cannot attack us, as it would be a religious atrocity.'

5 Conclusion: strategic spirituality as both innate and malleable

As this chapter has shown, first in general terms and then specifically in the case of The Programme, spirituality features centrally and strategically in (some) Adivasis' struggles for rights and self-empowerment. Adivasis define their distinctly non-Hindu identity and attachment to land through their association with the forest and spiritual connection with specific places, as is well documented by scholarship. Yet the spiritual and identarian significance of forest land for Adivasis hardly ever automatically or inevitably translates into effective, let alone strategic, action towards maintaining or gaining land and other rights. As we have seen here, through the prism of The Programme, the strategic significance of spirituality lies in **ideologically** galvanising and motivating members; and **practically** protecting and enabling action. Most members are not fighting to hold onto threatened land, but rather to regain land that was lost. To enable this, they are 'reconnected' to belief systems that emphasise land rights as the basis for a self-sufficient and empowered existence.

Where successful, the cultural-spiritual reconnection is as much a process of rediscovering old connections to the forest through the spiritual realm as one of discovering new ways to connect with the forest and the spiritual realm. On the one hand, The Programme works ‘with’ the cultural-spiritual ‘grain’. As one animator (one of a small minority of non-Adivasi animators) explained:

When we go to Adivasis, we don't say don't smoke or drink or don't eat this thing. If we embrace their culture, they will tell me things about their culture, this is how we enter into their lives and cultures. To mingle with Adivasis, we will have to adopt and embrace their culture.

On the other hand, the animators in The Programme also deliberately rework Adivasi spirituality into something that is more useful for collective self-empowerment – both ideologically and practically speaking – than would be, for instance, an emphasis on the mystical or on redemption in the afterlife. As one of The Programme’s founders explained to us in an interview:

Community elders and healers recognised reinvigorating Adivasi culture and spirituality is what would lead people to forests and land, and away from what the neoliberal market economy was luring people into. I hence do not agree with the development rhetoric of letting target groups do whatever they want. There has to be an ideological and political vision and direction.

The songs and incantations – some composed by animators – we heard in ritual celebrations often merged the practical with the ideological-transcendent. They contained evidently non-traditional elements, emphasising things such as strengthening the organisation.

What is **strategic** about how The Programme ‘resurrects’ culture and ‘reconnects’ Adivasis with their spirituality is that it aims not to find or recover what was originally lost, but rather to discover and build what is needed for the present: the pragmatic combination of existing – or, where lost, reconstructed – cultural-spiritual practices with ones that are creatively repurposed and repositioned to serve modern, worldly ends, such as supporting an FRA application, holding a festival-cum-rally, distributing seeds or accessing NREGA work.

This redirection of spirituality towards clear objectives is what makes it a multi-functional enabler of **strategic** action. The raw material for spirituality to become strategy already exists, but the material must be moulded into shape. This understanding steers clear both of romantic essentialisations of Adivasis as inherently, unreflexively wrapped up with nature; and of cynical tendencies to dismiss performances of indigeneity as ‘inauthentically’ pandering to hegemonic cultural expectations. It highlights how culture and spirituality have strategic value precisely when they are recognised as both innate **and** malleable and worked into action repertoires of ‘[e]veryday shrewdness and canny use of customary arrangements’ (Chandra 2013: 55).

In conclusion, first, I wish to suggest that activists and organisations working with other vulnerable marginal groups can learn from this how to use spirituality strategically in enabling processes of self-empowerment. In The Programme's work, even for those Adivasis who have lost reasons to hope, spirituality helps by both ideologically empowering them and practically/instrumentally enabling action. Recognising, rediscovering or repurposing features of spirituality that are malleable towards progressive ends – such as an apparently innate cultural-religious preference for agroecology, which motivates land rights claims as well as furnishing evidence for them – may enable other organisations and activists working with vulnerable marginal groups to make greater practical gains. How this works will, inevitably, look very different in different contexts.

Second, for all contexts, the findings here underscore the importance of protecting and creating spaces for FoRB, both as a right in itself and as a potential vector for progressive change. As recent research indicates, international donors often struggle to successfully advocate for FoRB. Yet even in delicate political situations, there are alternative pressure points, such as protecting intangible cultural heritage, including cultural-spiritual practices, which governments may perceive as less intrusive than direct advocacy on behalf of religious minorities (Tadros 2020).

Third and finally, this chapter also highlights, in the Indian context, how much is at stake for India's 104 million Adivasis. International audiences are rightly concerned about the real and present threats to other religious minorities in India, but are often unaware of the threats to tribal peoples' FoRB. Notwithstanding the importance of small victories and subtle, strategic actions they can undertake themselves, tribal groups in India need greater international support and solidarity.

Notes

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- † I am gratefully indebted to Mariz Tadros, Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Paddy and Cathy Holden, and several anonymous others for their feedback, expertise and corrections on earlier versions of this chapter, which was published after consultation with the IDS Research Ethics convenor, Jackie Shaw. I am furthermore grateful for the support from the CREID research programme, which enabled this publication.
- 1 Philip Mader, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.
- 2 Clear conceptual and empirical engagements with the relationship and differences between spirituality and religion can be found in MacDonald *et al.* (2015) and Zinnbauer *et al.* (1997). By way of reflecting on my own positionality as researcher, it is worth noting that I am an agnostic atheist, and this research project was my first encounter with Adivasi spirituality. I take no positions for or against the veracity of any spiritual claims or

- experiences explored here. My aim is to articulate how references to the supernatural and transcendent may inform and enable actions in the earthly world.
- 3 Nilsen (2018b: 59–63) suggests that a process of gradual, partial incorporation occurred, which also generated political and economic interdependencies between tribal societies and outside empires.
 - 4 Kujur (2001: 21) mentions that by 1628 some Adivasi villages were coming under the control of Hindu revenue collectors ‘who were courtiers in the palace of the first tribal king’.
 - 5 Probably by a social worker and advocate for tribal peoples, who was also a highly visible member of the Indian National Congress (Moodie 2015: 183).
 - 6 The Indian government’s plan to construct a series of 30 dams funded by the World Bank (which has been partially completed), and the resistance by tribal groups and ecological activists to the flooding of large forest areas in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, raised the international profile of Adivasis’ struggles for rights and recognition.
 - 7 A slogan also used widely in The Programme.
 - 8 As the then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, declared (BBC News 2007).
 - 9 The movement of people and ideas between Adivasi communities and Naxalites, and the relationships and submerged ideological tensions that emerge, are central themes in Alpa Shah’s fascinating *Nightmarch* (Shah 2018).
 - 10 Based on the above-quoted estimate of there being 10,000 armed Naxalites, less than one in 10,000 Adivasis would be a Maoist rebel.
 - 11 In full: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006.
 - 12 As India’s *Economic Times* reported, contrary to the petitioners’ assertions that the FRA was widely abused, ‘only a few hundred illegal squatters’ were found among the two million rejected forest rights claims (Sharma 2019).
 - 13 The persecution of Christians and other religious minorities has also increased. Several states have passed ‘anti-conversion’ laws to make ‘forcible conversion’ to a new religion illegal.
 - 14 Memorial stones on the graves of ancestors, known for instance to the Munda Adivasis as *sasan* or *sasandiri*, designate a site as sacred (Chandra 2013).
 - 15 Calculated from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs’ monthly updates on the status of the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.
 - 16 To be clear, Amita Baviskar does not allege this herself; she paraphrases.
 - 17 In practice, the steps narrated separately here all overlap. They are described separately for simplicity.
 - 18 The agricultural expert in the research team was concerned that the use of minimal technology, combined with no efforts to improve seeds or learn new practices, would keep members poor. To his chagrin, he found animators and leaders in The Programme unwilling to consider even simple productivity-enhancing techniques.
 - 19 National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (NREGA).
 - 20 A stark contrast is that Adivasi women are free to enjoy the consumption of alcohol, such as *mahua* wine, whereas most caste-Hindu women are not (*cf.* Shah 2018: 211–22). Survey data also indicates that, in stark contrast to SCs, there is no significant difference in male vs female infant mortality among Adivasis and ST women face fewer gendered impediments in accessing health care (Maity 2017).

- 21 Because The Programme explicitly animates its members never (again) to borrow from external sources.
- 22 Well-established groups often maintain links with other groups in the area and remain in contact using mobile phones.
- 23 Our fieldwork schedule was closely controlled by leaders of The Programme, who decided which locations were to be visited and at what times, and made arrangements with local animators.
- 24 A dozen or so semi-permanent huts, constructed among the ruins of a disused Indian Railways facility, by tribespeople who had been displaced from their ancestral forests less than a generation ago to make way for mango orchards, in which they now worked as bonded labourers.
- 25 When working in rural majority-Adivasi areas, in which Naxalite Maoists often have an active presence, contacts with the Maoists are unavoidable. In one region we visited for our research, we were accompanied at all times by a liaison person. We left when the liaison informed us that the rebels could 'no longer guarantee our safety'.
- 26 In Hindi-speaking regions; similarly known as *maandar*, *maadar*, *maander*.
- 27 On several occasions, we witnessed group members going into trance while dancing.
- 28 Shah (2018: 149–50) also reports that this distinguishes Adivasis from the often teetotal attitudes of Naxalite cadres, who often come from urban higher-caste backgrounds.
- 29 Instead of the Hindi 'Namaskaar'; 'Jai Johar' is a salutation in praise of Mother Earth used by Adivasi communities in central and eastern India.
- 30 As Lerche and Shah (2018) point out, relations of race, ethnicity, caste, tribe, region and gender 'conjugate' with class in India as bases of oppression, and hence also shape (and at times undermine) collective struggles to overcome oppression.
- 31 How The Programme made cultural-spiritual expressions a factor in its FRA claims lends credence to the proposition by Nilsen (2018b: 663) that, 'whether rights-based legislation can be made to serve counterhegemonic ends or not depends, most fundamentally, on how [a] new legal regime is appropriated'.
- 32 Several animators, only slightly paraphrased, said of the traditional seed varieties: 'you just throw it on the ground and it grows'.
- 33 Members in the Hindi-speaking areas referred to it as *desi kheti*, roughly translated as 'traditional farming'.
- 34 Associations of Adivasi groups may register as organisations with a formal identity. These are separate from The Programme itself.
- 35 It is possible that this is an ambivalent outcome, in terms of engendering greater hatred and disapproval from Hindutva activists, as a price to be paid (under the conditions of Indian identity politics) for the enhanced resource access and participation rights which come with recognition.

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