



Social Work Research Through Tribal/Adivasi People's Lens: Observations from Academic Engagement

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to engage with social work research through the tribal/ adivasi people's lens. Based on the author's engagement in teaching and doing research in relation to Tribal/Adivasi communities of India, the paper explores the possibility of building a frame of reference for research engagement suited to the context. It demonstrates how the scheduled/tribal areas represent one particular location of a context-based research. To this end, the author, through observations drawn from academic engagement, throws some light on contextualization of social research in relation to tribal/ adivasi areas.

Keywords: social work research, tribal/ adivasi areas, tribal/ adivasi lens, knowledge and society, academic space, contextualization



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The historicity of social research practice in India foregrounds tribal/ adivasi areas as an intrinsic field of study since the inception of *Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1784 and the launch of *Asiatic Researches*. It became a subject matter of research under the Anthropological Survey of India and the Tribal Research Institutes within the larger aim of nation building since the 1950s (Xaxa, 2003; Danda & Danda, 2010). Currently, Anthropology departments of Universities which got implanted in 1920s continue to include 'tribal studies' as one of the subjects of disciplinary engagement even as Anthropological Survey of India had eventually discontinued and Tribal Research Institutes have become part of the tribal welfare departments of the states. Moreover, the contribution to knowledge from the studies of tribal people has created a repository of knowledge that indicates the changing methodological shifts from one of 'ethnographic accounts' in the colonial period to study of peasants, rural-urban social realities, and then to ecological and environment in the post-colonial period largely with the purpose of shaping society, development and national integration.

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This changing trend has given rise to possibilities for theoretical departure and/or rejection of colonial construct (methodological primitiveness) and adoption of mainstream-integration approach which eventually also gave rise to researches (Savyasaachi, 2012; Kalpana, 2016) on aspects of political autonomy, development and human rights within the context. Simultaneously, there has been growing researches (Padel et. al., 2018) to understand the influence of global structures and processes that impact on ecology, environment, culture and history of tribal/adivasi peoples. Even more, this evolving trend has also exposed the status of anthropology 'study of other cultures' implicating epistemological challenges of social science research in general. For example, '*Anthropology in India; Current Epistemological and Future Challenges*' (2010) edited book by Ajit K. Danda and Dipali G. Danda captures the current epistemological questions confronting Anthropology in India today. Along with this, there has also been a growing scholarship within the tribal/adivasi academic engagements in India (Munda & Mullick, 2003; Xaxa, 2003; Bhukya, 2017; Bodhi & Jojo, 2019). This genre of research studies is also posing fundamental epistemological questions (Akhup, 2013; Bodhi, 2020). In fact, this has given rise to new thinking, and also generated consciousness within scholars to actively engage in redefining and/or contextualizing research (Oommen, 2007, Bodhi, 2016; Bhukha, 2017; Bodhi and Jojo, 2019 and Bodhi, 2020 are few examples) in line with the trend observed in the emergent Dalit (as indicated in Guru and Sarukkai, 2012) and indigenous studies (Smith, 1999; Descola, 2005 and Moreton-Robinson, 2014 are few examples). The 'National Seminar' organised (10-16 August 2021) on 'Decolonizing Research: Methods and Methodologies' by Mahatma Gandhi University, School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies, Kottayam, augments the emerging fresh energy of efforts to deepen and contextualize social research that is suited to tribal/adivasi communities.

Therefore, this paper engages in a reflective understanding of teaching and doing research through tribal/adivasi people's lens as viewed from the author's engagement at the School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai. The finding and interpretation in this study is based on observations drawn from the author's classroom teaching and doing research in the emerging enhanced Integrated M.Phil. - Ph.D. program in the School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (henceforth Institute) since 2017. In particular, the paper is informed by observations from academic engagement with scholars of 2019-2020 (17 scholars) and 2020-

2021 batches (15 scholars) enrolled for the second semester two credits M.Phil optional course titled, 'Tribe, State and Social Research' along with six students registered for Integrated M.Phil. - Ph.D works under this author.

On this, the author attempts to throw some light on building 'a frame of reference' for teaching and doing research concerning tribal areas as one example that can inform, to some extent, the ongoing attempts of scholars to conceptualize trans-disciplinary social science research (Levine, 1995 and Mukherjee, 2004 are two examples) in the Indian context. The section that follows presents the observations - finding and interpretation around three themes namely, a) academic space and tribal/adivasi communities, b) social location and research, c) foregrounding ontological and epistemological research questions, c) constructing tribal/adivasi people's lens and c) contextualizing the field, methods and fieldwork. |

Academic Space and Tribal/Adivasi Context

Tribal/adivasi area as site of research and practice found a critical space within the teaching, research and field action program from the early stage of inception of this Institution in 1936. The Institute, established initially within the philosophy of 'social care', considered tribal areas and people as important subjects for academic and social work response towards the attempts for overall development of the country. Towards this goal, the Department of Tribal Welfare was launched in 1951 under the first five-year plan. The department headed by Dr. Behram Mehta demonstrated the first instance of research and fieldwork among tribal people in Chhindwara District, Madhya Pradesh (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, n.d.a). Furthermore, as noted in the experience of this author the contribution of this Institution to tribal/adivasi people's welfare and development has further got strengthened in 2006 when the Institute got restructured and Centre for Social Justice and Governance, School of Social Work was created which launched 'M.A. in Social Work in Dalit and Tribal Studies and action'. The research in tribal areas has also become a part of integrated Mphil/PhD programs in 2016-17 when eventually various optional courses concerning tribes were included in the teaching programs of Centre of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies, School of Development Studies and School of Social Work.

The scholars at the Institute (as noted in those included in this study) are oriented by the imagining of the Institute's character - a shared academic space across the seventeen Integrated M.Phil. - Ph.D programs and are given the opportunity for a rigorous academic engagement that is

contextualised and relevant in line with the principles envisaged in the vision.

The Vision of the TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai) has been to be an institution of excellence in higher education that continually responds to changing social realities through the development and application of knowledge, towards creating a people-centred, ecologically sustainable and just society that promotes and protects dignity, equality, social justice and human rights for all. (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, n.d.b)

The scholars carry with them a history of interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary 'people-centred' research practice as can be inferred from the activities of erstwhile Research Units and Teaching Departments established that actively engaged in teaching, research and field action projects in relation to welfare and development of people since it became a Deemed University in 1964. This got further strengthened in 2006 institutional restructuring in which the very epistemological character of the Institute shifted from one of 'methodological specialization' to adoption of a trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research approach. In fact, as noted by this Institution the repository of knowledge produced available in varied forms of publications indicate that research work in the Institute produced socially relevant and empowering knowledge in the subject domains of social work, social sciences, human resources management, disaster management and response, health systems and allied fields. This research work has contributed immensely to the policy response at sectors of 'public, civil society and the development and helped shape planning, policy and programme formulation, foster critical rethinking and development of people-centred interventions' (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, n.d.).

In particular, as observed by this author, the teaching and research activities with reference to tribal/advasi areas in this Institution has been a constitutive element in shaping an egalitarian academic space and scholarships. The academic restructuring and re-envisioning of 2006 (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2006), Integrated M. Phil. - Ph.D. program in particular, gave new avenues for an engagement in teaching and research that strengthened the focus on tribal communities – their struggles and aspirations across newly established schools and centers. It actually generated an institutional re-imaging towards a trans-disciplinary orientation and/or methodological pluralism that also allowed 'tribal epistemologies' to be squarely located within the Institute's academic space through the active contribution of faculties and scholars working on this

area. This event, in the observation of this author, became a very critical element in re-purposing the research agenda through active intellectual engagement of faculties and scholars. It oriented a situation for taking a paradigm shift epistemologically giving rise to possibilities for conceptualization and visualization of 'epistemology of the peripheries' and creation of space for 'voices from India's alternative centers' (Bodhi & Bipin, 2019). Among others, this conceptualization gave possibilities for theorizing sociocultural and/or experiential location in the production of knowledge. Centering of the social-cultural and experiential location – tribal/ adivasi in particular in research further strengthened the Institute's people-centered, practice-based and trans-disciplinary philosophical and epistemological research orientation. It gave rise to the process for contextualization of research philosophy, methodology and research agenda through the experience at the margins (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012) of the Indian reality. Moreover, the emerging circumstance also gave rise to an academic environment that is conducive for scholars and faculties to exercise their commitment to teaching and researching the tribal communities as can be seen from the increase in the scholars and scholarships. This may be marked as the new beginning in the history of this Institute where teaching and research commitment and engagement concerning tribal communities became one example that demonstrated context-based trans-disciplinary research practice for social change and transformation.

Social Location and Research

As noted in the observation of this author, there has been a qualitative enhancement of participation of scholars and faculties in teaching and research that gave due emphasis on tribal/ adivasi people's realities as made possible by the creation of schools that catered to the tribal and other marginalized communities in the teaching and research program of the Institute. In particular, 'Tribe, State and Social Research' as a second semester M.Phil. optional course located in the School of the Social taught by this author provided the required academic space for scholars to engage in deeper understanding and researching tribal areas in the school of social work in particular. As can be seen from the profile of students opting this course over the past two academic years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021), scholars registered under various Schools of the Institute such as School of Social Work, Centre for the Exclusion and Inclusive Policies, School of Development Studies, and Women Studies have been enrolled in this course and had contributed to the enhancement of the deliberative pedagogy and connected curriculum as informed by the varied disciplinary orientation, social, gender, class and caste locations in which they inhabit.

Given this, the epistemological framework that defines this classroom space centered around 'Tribe, State and Social Research' gave opportunity to the teacher-scholar to nurture curriculum and pedagogy that is grounded in the lived experience of people through active engagement of scholars coming from varied locations. It allowed joint effort of the class to create a process that respects and appreciates cultural, historical and experiential differences. The engagements oriented a pedagogical connection through a process that involved confrontation of every participant and the classroom with the question of 'who I am/who we are' and 'what is the purpose of life and learning'. This entailed scholars to be directly connected to the contexts where they can come into contact with their identity 'as ontological reality' and also self 'as epistemological' for being and becoming an active partner of knowledge production for social change and transformation.

Foregrounding Ontological and Epistemological Research Questions

Over these periods of engagements, the nature of questions raised by the scholars in relation to tribal/adivasi studies has been facilitative in pursuing deeper meaning/understanding of research: 'what research is?', 'whose research?' and 'on what purpose?' Engagement in such questions has been creating positive spaces for scholars to engage with the ontological and epistemological foundation of research in relation to conceptualizing research proposals for researching the social world that included cross-cutting social, cultural, economic, health, political, livelihoods, marginalization, exploitation and environmental issues relating to tribal/adivasi communities. It has been critical in nurturing awareness and opening of the mind of the scholars for deeper reading and discussion to grasp the basic ideas, philosophies and perspectives that are fundamental in conceptualization of research proposals - building methodological and theoretical frameworks. This entailed also creation of a free and egalitarian classroom process that allowed scholars to ask fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology in relation to the subject of their study as being part of the social world/reality, 'what is?' and the possibilities and challenges in arriving at knowledge - 'are we capable of knowing?'. Given below are some observations from this engagement that can contribute to the understanding of conceptualization of social work research in relation to tribal/adivasi areas and communities.

- The engagement on ontological and epistemological questions at this level reflected through tribal areas re-affirms that the subject of the study is socially constructed and

situated, and perspective/lens occupies the central point in understanding this social world. Every research proposal has its own perspective/lens that defines the subject of the study (ontological) and the epistemological framework.

- Research framework should recognize the diversity of reality and methodological pluralism. Methodological pluralism takes into consideration epistemological locations of the subject of study as situated - a learning very crucial to the construction of framework that would challenge framing of reality and knowledge by received theories and give possibilities for emergence of 'epistemologies of the peripheries.' This would argue for recognition of alternative centers of knowledge and epistemologies. It would generate a process of methodological mediation by the context and realization that knowledge has to be freed from power and hegemony.
- Engaging and challenging the colonial construct of tribes - including the categories such as 'tribes/scheduled tribes', 'adivasi', and 'indigenous' in the classroom is crucial in arriving at a frame of reference for research and understanding of state and people. The scholars engaging in tribal people's reality are observed to be equipped epistemologically to decolonialize constructs that framed tribes in terms of assimilation, integration and isolation frameworks of the state. It gives them an orientation of research theories that makes it possible to move beyond this trapped frame of binary and ethnocentrism as it negotiates with the centralizing methodological tendencies.
- Moreover, scholars engaging in the tribal/adivasi areas go through the process that foregrounds methodologies defined by principles that uphold 'diversity of reality with equity'. It is crucial to formulate research problems and questions with an understanding that the research proposal that envisages a positivist 'researcher-researched', 'superior-inferior' relationship has to be challenged through tribal/adivasi people's worldview in the emerging context. The tribal epistemological question gives them a perspective in constructing a world where there is no 'giver-taker' relationship but a world of reciprocity and interconnectedness and reaffirmation of ontological diversity and 'points-of-views'.

Constructing Tribal/Adivasi Lens

The insights coming from research dissertations/thesis concerning tribal/adivasi people's

contexts, particularly by the scholars belonging to tribal communities, further reaffirm the need to recognize frameworks/lens, concepts and process that secures lived experience (lived data) at their own specific locations and contexts. The research engagements over these years on these contexts indicate that research framework should be built on worldview and lived experiences embedded in a construct of social world where there is intricate and/or dialogical relationship between aspects namely, a) physical world, b) the spiritual world, and c) human world (as suggested in Indigenous Peoples' Studies). As suggested from these insights the social world as it appears in the tribal and Adivasi lifeworld can be described as:

'the tribal social world is defined by relationality in which the idea of land and/or location occupies a central point in the epistemological realm. In fact, land is often referred to as 'the mother' - the origin and source of life. Land becomes their homeland, a standpoint or the frame of reference. Land anchors their culture and livelihood and shapes the meaning of their lived experiences and the way how they construct knowledge out of the sense that they draw in relationship with themselves and others in the world around. Viewed from this kind of a worldview and lived experience underscores a type of fieldwork that is informed by a social reality of the kind presented in indigenous tribal/adivasi contexts. The foundational aspect of social reality in these contexts emphasises a) 'universality of subjectivism' - meaning a shared human and social foundation, and b) 'objectification of the particularity' - meaning lived experiences and boundaries of differences. The indigenous tribal/adivasi methodologies argue for a world of diversity and sociality or social interaction, where every entity has a point-of-view, and ability to act. Secondly, indigenous tribal/adivasi methodologies argue that relationality - human relatedness and sociality is the centre of indigenous peoples' philosophy. Relationality becomes a point of departure as well as a frame of reference for the indigenous standpoint.'

Furthermore, given below are some of the emerging concepts that should inform a tribal/adivasi people's lens of social work research namely:

Harmony with Land and Nature: The worldview of tribes/adivasi people suggests a lifeworld defined by interconnectedness to nature and its environment. Tribal life revolves around different seasons and different festivals and reflects closeness to nature. For example, 'Sahrul' is celebrated to mark the arrival of the new season and also the

marriage between the Earth and Sun. The forest and land become a homeland and provider of their livelihood. It upholds their worldview, culture and identity.

Indigeneity: Experience of tribes/Adivasi people indicates a relative sense of indigeneity, as first settlers in the region. It is imagined that their forefathers came to this land centuries back, cleared the jungles and made the land cultivable.

Village Commons: The tribal communities are marked by a shared clan-based belonging and ownership as provided by the village territoriality. The land, forest, water as commons belongs to the people and chief or the village head is the guardian of this land. The village commons is owned based on a usufruct rights.

Self-governing System: The existence of tribal people and their identities is closely linked to local self-governance. It is an intrinsic part of their social and political structure. Every tribal village is distinctive of a local governance system based on chieftainship. The nature of the chieftainship system could vary from village to village in the given local political economy and regional ecology.

Diversity and Uniqueness: This social world is characterized by fundamental features of diversity and plurality. The fact that tribal and Adivasi people still hold onto their identity, culture and land is a defense of diversity and co-existence.

Dialogical Epistemology: The struggle of Adivasi and tribal people reflects a dialogical epistemology. Knowledge is constructed through lived experiences in a relational ethnic lifeworld. Given their circumstance of complexity and vulnerabilities, they may have less knowledge to handle contingencies but provide a lifeworld that defines possibilities. Life comes as a probability and possibility.

Dialogical Politics of Survival: The struggle of tribal/ adivasi people suggests a dialogical politics of survival. It upholds self-rule and self-determination as matter for survival and development. Their daily struggles foreground survival politics. In this politics, winning and losing are parts of life, and dynamics of lived experiences generate strategic thinking where conflicts are part of life at strategic place and time.

Sociality, Reciprocity and Respect: The social relationship of tribal communities is defined

by reciprocity, trust and respect. There is a social system which people impose on them as a matter of being social. Their relationship is based on a reciprocal frame where there is an element of respect and trust for the other - somewhat expressed in the barter system of the earlier times.

Consensual Democracy: The lived experiences of tribes and adivasi people suggest consensual democracy. The affairs of the community are run on consensus principle. The consensus defines rationality and civility. It is arrived at within the social relationship grounded in collective worldview. Consensus takes precedence over individual rationality. All disputes and conflicts are governed by consensual decisions - in a sense of consensual democracy.

Contextualizing the Field, Method and Fieldwork

As observed by this author in the experience of research practice on issues of the conceptualization of field, methods and fieldwork concerning tribal communities, the scholars are exposed to the importance of developing a theoretical understanding of context-based research. Context-based research gives centrality to the context and gives possibility for conceptualization of the framework from the tribal/adivasi people's perspective.

This lens is the vantage point and/or points-of-view which lately has been also referred to as 'a perspective from within' by tribal/adivasi scholars. This lens is defined by the location, history, culture, sociopolitical and experience of the subject of study. The field or the subject of the study including methods and fieldwork constructed through this lens defines the process towards context-based research in tribal/adivasi people's contexts. Given this, context-based research or the engagement on understanding the process of contextualization of research proposals in relation to tribal/adivasi people provides the opportunity to engage with the research subject that represents one example of doing research in complex societies. Besides, given that these regions are set apart from the rest of India culturally and geopolitically from the rest of India, the scholars have the opportunity of being placed in a situation that would facilitate them towards research engagement that takes into consideration the cultural diversities and geopolitical complexities.

Towards this, given below are some academic engagement observations of the author on contextualization of research methodology - constructing the field, identification of strategies and

techniques and fieldwork process for data collection concerning tribal/advansi peoples and contexts,

- The scholars researching in tribal areas are confronted with specific methodological questions to do with principles of inquiry, techniques, and research ethics adopted. They are faced with issues relating to the social location (cultural and identity) and objective research. This entails contextualization of the research methods and techniques as a way out.
- Contextualization process gives importance to centering research questions in the context. It necessitates the researcher to make a paradigm shift in the approach to the field, method and fieldwork process. In this, the field view of the research has to be accompanied with a frame of reference that upholds the ontological diversity and experiences. The context and the lived experiences should be placed in the center of the research question and fieldwork process.
- The research questions - lines of inquiry should be developed with the understanding of the subject matter of the research that could be socio-cultural, political, history, ecology or environment in the larger understanding of the structures and processes. The research questions with specific lines of enquiries should define the nature and sources of the data and the method adopted to avoid the likelihood of the researcher imprinting its bias on the research problem and question.
- Approaching from this, the orientation to research also entails centering the methods in the field where the 'lived data' could be generated in a manner of co-researching and/or co-production of knowledge with the communities. This would entail generation of data sourced from lived experiences of the people from oral/verbal responses, observation, and records facilitated with context centric lines of inquiry in phenomenological, archeological, ethnographic, historical or grounded methodological frameworks.
- When there is a need to understand the trend through frequency distribution in terms of quantitative trends, surveys would be the main source both at level representation or census. But if the study is focusing on the social processes, institutional dimensions, political, and governance, it would require in depth interview and observation. In fact, a

difference should be made between the respondents - interviewing individuals in their capacity and informants - interviewing individuals as representatives of the community.

- The informant interviews would lead to studies for in-depth understanding in a sense of case studies where the question of traditional disciplinary approach to scientificity and authenticity converges with the context. The context approach to fieldwork can give possibilities for a methodological process that moves beyond the given frames. It would challenge the positivist empirical research approach, and suggests adopting a historical empirical approach and methods that gives primacy to the particular locations, social, cultural, economic and the political.

Conclusion

The context of tribes/ adivasi peoples of India, with its varied social, cultural, economic and political elements emerges as a field of study unique to social science research and practice in South Asia. Research in these contexts generates debates that challenge and set possibilities for theorizing experiences and margins, contextualization of ontology and epistemology in conformity with trends emerging in the school of social sciences dealing with knowledge and society (Oomen, 2007; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Patel, 2016). The contribution made by social research on varied aspects within tribal regions opens up new avenues where there can be possibilities for building democratic and equitable/egalitarian academic framework in teaching and doing research. The researchers emerging from various social locations within India belonging to varied marginal regions have critical elements in shaping theory and knowledge in social science. This engagement creates an academic space where knowledge production today can be constantly negotiated and a path be set for research engagement that recognizes people as active producers of knowledge rather than being a mere recipient of a 'given' knowledge.

The recent methodological trends, debates and challenges in tribal/Adivasi people or studies of tribal societies accessible today in academic space underscore the need for a concerted deliberation on methodology and procedures for the study. Increasingly, the emerging studies attempt to propose a methodology that would redefine tribal people studies through a positive departure from the earlier understanding (colonial) of tribal studies (also suggested in Bodhi, 2016). This endeavor should also delegitimize power structures that define knowledge production within the social science disciplines. In doing so, it will imply that there is no methodology which is

detached and neutral. Moreover, methodological process is central to determining the type and nature of knowledge that is arrived at, and the direction suggested for social change and development. It suggests the importance of a methodology orientation of research that would lead towards recognition and reclamation of Adivasi knowledge, culture and worldview as a positive effort toward building vibrant and self-sustained communities.

In conclusion, it can be submitted that contextualizing research in tribal/adivasi realities should entail building categories, concepts, and frameworks based on recognition of people, their narratives and lived experience. The frame of reference proposed here as one example for contextualized research calls for a positive methodological affirmation of context in social science research. The context-based research studies are largely affirmative of principles of diversity and social justice as matter of why and how we pursue a social transformation through social science research engagements.

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