

# ‘Why didn’t you bring us a pumpkin?’ Relational recognition of caste, class, and tribe in rural Andhra Pradesh, India

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This article analyses the ways characteristics associated with the ‘Schedule Tribe’ (‘ST’) category in India shape situated acts of relating to others with either deference or assumed superiority. Ethnography shows how within an indigenous Adivasi community the traits that determine identification within the group generate feelings of entitlement and stigma, and provide frameworks for ascribing status distinctions to others, as equal, superior, or inferior. The ethnography of interaction between members of an ‘ST’ community captures the interpellative process of social actors continually placing each other into subjectively constituted maps of association and relatedness that are informed by longer discourses of classification. The material illuminates how characteristics associated with ‘ST’ identities that are valorized in one context may be stigmatized in another, suggesting that literatures on politics of recognition must be more attentive to the contextual variability of such frameworks in different spaces.

## Introducing the ‘Scheduled Tribes’

Through ethnographic analysis of a constitutional identity category in India – ‘Scheduled Tribes’ – this article revisits a fundamental anthropological question: what does it mean to conceptualize ethnic, cultural, or caste-based identities as ‘socially constructed’? The classification, ‘Scheduled Tribe’ (hereafter ‘ST’) will be ubiquitously familiar to Indian scholars and South Asianists; to other readers it may appear an obtuse starting point for an anthropological discussion of recognition. Some readers may themselves identify as belonging to an ‘ST’, while others will pause at the striking colonial-ethnographic overtones of this label. The differences in the relative positions from which readers relate to this term mirror the point at the core of this article: people position each other in subjectively constituted maps of association, informed by longer discourses of classification and shaped by respective social locations. While group identities are always relationally constructed (Barth 1969), this ethnographic analysis brings transactionalist approaches in anthropology into conversation with historical philosophy (Hacking 1999) and studies of indigenous recognition (Coulthard 2014) to

offer a modest intervention into how we think about processes of identification. I take the Koya caste/tribe group<sup>1</sup> as a case study in which governmentalized classifications take on a multivalent social life.

The question at the heart of this article, ‘why didn’t you bring us a pumpkin?’, was posed by a local Koya lawyer to a younger, unrelated Koya migrant labourer. In the context of an introduction I initiated, this demand for a pumpkin encapsulates the relational dynamics of processes of classing, acquisition of status, and recognition in the Koya community. The imposition of this demand references and romanticizes shared kinship and relatedness within the indigenous Koya community, across an apparent class divide. Pumpkins, like meat, palm wine, and ears of corn, are symbolic of the solidarities of small-scale seasonal shifting cultivation called *sainda*, in Koya language, or *podu* in Telugu. By presumptively locating his interlocutor within the traditional economy of rain-fed, slash-and-burn cultivation, bound up with seasonal animistic religious festivals, the lawyer simultaneously positions himself as a semi-urban local elite to whom traditional ritual gifts should be brought.

Koyas are an indigenous, Adivasi community who are officially recognized as an ‘ST’ in the Southeast Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Before delineating further the geographic and sociological context of the participants in this research, I begin by outlining how scholarship has understood this label, and how it helps us push forward debates on identity and social construction in anthropology.

The term ‘Scheduled Tribes’ is a constitutional category in India that includes over 105 million people (Radhakrishna 2016: 1). It traces back to the listing or ‘scheduling’ of tribal communities in colonial India, through the Scheduled Districts Act 1874, and Government of India Act 1935 (Paidipaty 2010: 15; Singh 1978: 1226; Xaxa 1999; 2016: 227). Groups listed as such were typically those deemed ‘unruly’ by the British administration, whose economic expansion was resisted in areas inhabited by tribal groups outside the caste system (Bates & Shah 2017). The appropriateness of the term, and the criteria for inclusion within it, have been hotly debated at the intersection of academic, governmental, and administrative discourses (Ambagudia 2011; Ghurye 1943). When India became independent, the ‘ST’ category was retained and given new impetus through far-reaching constitutional protections intended to counter historical inequalities (Galanter 1984).

The ‘ST’ classification applies to many geographically disparate, culturally distinct communities unincorporated into caste hierarchies, inhabiting forested and mountainous areas of the subcontinent (Shah 2019; Xaxa 1999; 2008). Contrary to the abiding colonial governmental emphasis on geographical isolation, historical scholarship has opened debate on the extent of contact between India’s tribes, castes and the colonial administration. Anthropologists and Indian sociologists in the mid-twentieth century analysed processes of absorption and integration of Indian tribes into the caste system (Bailey 1960; Sachchidananda 1970; Sinha 1965). Tribal groups were retroactively ascribed a new dimension of political agency by Subaltern Studies historians: despite territorial ‘exclusion’ from the regulations of the British colonial administration, tribal groups in India were ‘fully involved in kingships, in land and forest politics, in tributary relationships with other groups, in particular occupational specializations and even in commerce and war’ (Banerjee 2016: 132; S. Guha 2013). Political and historical research shows tribal groups constituted whole societies which must be analysed on their own terms (Bhukya 2017; Xaxa 2008: 3–5), though in many ways contemporary ‘tribes’ are politically networked in ways that mirror castes. Latent

questions of whether there is any substantive difference or distinctive character between India's tribal groups, vis-à-vis castes, resurface in calls for Adivasi studies (Dasgupta 2018) but remain open and dependent on context. In this vein, Adivasis' contemporary relationship to the state and the nation is the focus of a resurgence of scholarship (Froerer 2007; Shah 2010; Tilche 2022).<sup>2</sup>

This article contributes to these loaded literatures on caste and tribe, revealing the intersubjective experience of labelling and identification in situ. Established patterns of communication allow Koyas to communicate affinity with one another, but these may not always be reciprocated. The acronym 'ST' carries a range of associations and entitlements ranging from stigma to assertive authenticity as explored below. It has been incorporated into regional vernaculars of India, including Telugu, the written and spoken language of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and into Koya, the unscripted language of the Gondi family, in which the ethnographic research for this article was conducted. This article shows how such official classifications reproduce the categories they refer to, and as these labels become vehicles for community politics and affirmative action measures, they can compound existing inequalities and reiterate historical failures of recognition at a micro-level.

### The context of East Godavari Koyas

Among the heterogeneous set of communities classified officially as 'ST', Koyas are one of the most populous, numbering 590,739 in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in the 2011 census. Koyas are historically the majority population in hills and valleys adjacent to the Godavari river in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, as well as in neighbouring territories in Odisha and Chhattisgarh. People across different states, from various socio-economic backgrounds, identify as 'ST: Koya'. There is an abiding ambiguity in the ways that different terms are used for Koyas' community affiliation. The ethnonym denotes, in official terms, one of many 'STs' in the state of Andhra Pradesh, although it is common for Koyas to be referred to as a caste (*jāti*) in Telugu and in Koya language. While academic authors, policymakers, and implementers grapple with the challenges of placing people into analytical, descriptive, and administrative categories, this ethnography argues for a relational understanding of recognition in which actors are continually engaged in placing each other. Through exploring, at a granular level, interactions between Koya interlocutors from different constituencies of class, education, and integration, I show how people position themselves and each other in relation to essentialized notions of authenticity, assimilation, and status. This suggests that the literature on the politics of recognition must be more attentive to the contextual variability of recognition frameworks and provide a model for thinking about entrenched identity categories from the ground up.

The ethnography presented in this article is drawn from a period of twenty-two months of participatory doctoral fieldwork in erstwhile East Godavari District in Andhra Pradesh, India (now Alluri Seetharamaraju District) between 2016 and 2018. The research straddled an oscillation between remote villages, where the forest land of Koya shifting cultivators is ostensibly protected by affirmative action policies and state recognition, and more connected market towns, sites of schooling, employment, and administrative legibility for Koyas.

Participants in the research, Lokesh and Vignesh, were born in the hilltop village of Illuru (a pseudonym). Livelihoods in Illuru are based on the labour of shifting cultivation, the gathering of forest produce, the gathering of wages paid by forest

contractors and paper loggers (Bird 1983), and on highly subsidized grain from state depots through India's national public distribution system. Apart from sporadic and uneven allocations of state development, Illuru remains relatively isolated. Abundant with timber, nutritious roots, and forest land, it is a place often defined by those in nearby towns by its lack of development. There is no electricity, no tarmacked road, no school, and no primary health centre. A third participant, Arun, is now a high-status Koya advocate who was born in abject poverty in a market town, with comparatively significant infrastructure (government hospitals, schools and colleges) populated by a spectrum of Adivasi groups, Hindu castes, Muslims, and Christians. Critically, the discourses and expectations around recognizing other 'STs' differ radically between these settings.

### Trepidation and misrecognition

Arun Maravi<sup>3</sup> is a leading Koya-speaking advocate who lives in a rented house with his wife, Shalini, who belongs to a different 'ST' group, Konda Dora. A champion of the Koya language and passionate defender of the rights of shifting cultivators, Arun is an advocate both in the literal sense as a practising lawyer, and as a cultural representative. He speaks up for Koya cultivators in everyday encounters with bureaucracies, and with non-Koya, 'non-tribal' publics like the police and civil servants, emphasizing their honest temperament and authentic nature.

Arun's trajectory fluctuated between periods of relative affluence and professional success, and periods of excess drinking, poor health, and marital difficulties. In certain moments Arun brokered my relationships with other Koya lawyers, political leaders, and activists. Occasionally, I too became a broker of relationships, facilitating a connection between village and town, and introducing Arun to Koya friends and research participants, extending informal invitations to people who potentially could, but never did, become his clients. Arun is used to interacting with people from small villages in his professional life, representing 'STs' in pro-bono land cases, yet occasionally his terms of address and demeanour reveal an arrogance towards less educated, poorer community members. Through his LLB (Legum Baccalaureus) education and associated class transition, Arun has become a spokesperson and a mediator between village life and the peri-urban officialdom of the courts of market towns like Rampachodavaram.

Lokesh is an ambitious and hardworking young Koya man, who often represents Illuru villagers (most of whom are his relatives) within the administrative spaces of the town. Having laboured in the distant city of Bhimavaram, where he met his future wife, Lalitha, (the first non-Koya person to marry into Illuru village), Lokesh presents as a confident progressive young man, socially dextrous, with urbane friends including non-Koya people. He had come to town hoping to gain official documentation for the partition of his ancestral land from the local administrative office. I suggested to Lokesh that he and Arun would have much in common and offered to introduce them. Arun could be a helpful contact for Lokesh in his efforts to formally register the separation of plots of forest land. But outside the gates of Arun's rented house, Lokesh paused. '*Nanna andagud* (I shouldn't go in [Koya])', he told me. '*Nimma an. Nanna shanta antan le* (You go ahead, I'll do the shopping [Koya])'. It was striking that Lokesh would feel such trepidation, given he was a high-achiever who spoke disparagingly of the 'small village' mind-set of others. When I pressed him on why he wouldn't come in, he explained confidently that Arun was a big man (*pedda mansulu* [Telugu]), and he

was a small village person (*cinna nar mansud* [Koya]). I told him there was no need to be fearful of Arun, but Lokesh replied that it was not his fear, but rather his choice (*istam* [Telugu]).

Lokesh instinctively knew that entering the house would not be a positive experience for him, a viewpoint I struggled to understand. Perhaps he was intimidated by the grand iron gates. I repeated that Arun was a Koya language speaker, which momentarily almost swayed Lokesh. But even so, Arun was still a lawyer. By virtue of his LLB qualification and his position as an advocate, he was too 'big' for Lokesh to meet. Arun cultivated an approachable persona. Like a politician or an anthropologist, people called out to him in public without inhibition. But from Lokesh's perspective, Arun was so senior, his aura of officialdom so powerful, that he could not be engaged with face-to-face. At the time I was tempted to see this as a failure of my own ability to mediate. It later became clear to me that there were larger structural causes for Lokesh's hesitation.

Another research participant I accompanied regularly on journeys between village and town was Lokesh's younger brother-in-law, Badina Vignesh, who occasionally migrated for wage-labour, but had not stayed as long as Lokesh in school (fifth grade rather than tenth) and was less adept at navigating the Telugu cities outside the 'Scheduled Areas'. While travelling together with Vignesh into town, I again invited my interlocutor to stop at Arun's house. Vignesh obliged, perhaps less alert to the hierarchies to which Lokesh was so sensitive. On entering, he was urged to sit, as is customary in Koya homes where there is furniture. But Vignesh didn't want to sit. He stood with his hands clasped together in front of him, head slightly bowed, as if in school. Vignesh was not used to being in homes with furniture, nor had he spent much time at school. The cultural cues were not ones with which he was familiar.

As his hosts Arun and Shalini persisted in cajoling him to sit on a chair, he compromised and sat cross-legged on the tiled floor. When they insisted, he eventually took a seat, visibly uncomfortable and out of place. I suddenly felt remorse for having placed him in that position. 'You are from Illuru?', Arun enquired, a form of identification that would not be out of place in a school or government office, in which people are identified by name, family name, caste, village, district, and state. Vaguely familiar with the line of identification that was being demanded, Vignesh replied in the following manner: 'Vignesh; Badina Vignesh; ST: Koya; Illuru village; Rampachodavaram Mandal; East Godavari District', confirming he was Badina Vignesh, from Illuru village.

Arun had never been to Illuru – very few people in Rampachodavaram have – but he knew I had stayed there for many months and had cultivated the slopes along with the families there. '*Sainda tungtina* (do you practise shifting cultivation)?' Arun demanded.

'Awunu'. Vignesh nodded.

'*Mare gumodkai bare tattilin* (so why didn't you bring us a pumpkin? [Koya])' asked Arun.

Although he ostensibly extended the hospitality appropriate for a guest, Arun was speaking to Vignesh as if he were an inferior type of person, whose identity could be pinpointed and from whom produce could be demanded, combining mockery and rural stereotyping with paternalism. This example, echoing Parry's (2020: 46) weighting of class distinctions as more salient than caste affiliation, evoked a Weberian sense of social class, in which Arun's pride at having become someone who represents people like Vignesh, left him so enthralled to a preconceived notion of Vignesh's authenticity that he assumed superiority. The division between the two men emerged precisely from

the different frameworks of recognition that the two assume each other to embody: Vignesh appeared to Arun as a caricature of authenticity, while Arun represented for Vignesh a world of intimidating impersonal authority.

Advocating for the ancestral rights of 'STs' to their forest land, Arun puts people like Vignesh on a pedestal, eulogizing their strength and resilience in the face of the infringements of 'non-tribals' and the state. But Vignesh proved more awkward and aloof. Perhaps because there was no clear objective or transaction at stake, Arun fell back on an established formality of speech which betrayed his own assimilation and social mobility, leaving him unable to relate to Vignesh other than by projecting onto him the image of an unassimilated and authentically Koya cultivator who had failed to bring a pumpkin to town.

Arun fundamentally misrecognized Vignesh. The power of the categories that Arun worked with daily – that he sees as having emancipatory potential – provided him with a framework to assert himself. This assuredness in his own capacity for recognition enabled him to completely miss the point that Vignesh is so much more than a provider of pumpkins. Vignesh aspires to a life unbounded by the routines of *sainda* agriculture and his obligations to his kin. As with Lokesh in the earlier interaction, I saw Vignesh as a different person in that moment. Instead of the skilled, confident, boisterous, and accomplished young man who could prepare a strip of land for cultivation, or survive in the forest with a blade and a box of matches, who loves socializing, dressing up for weddings, trips, and the cinema, I saw a 'small village' boy who had never learned to take his seat, to use a mobile phone, or speak confidently with his 'seniors'. Vignesh was momentarily eco-incarcerated in Arun's presence, tethered to the image of himself embodying a traditional livelihood, with a close bond to nature (Shah 2010: 130-7).<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on indigeneity delineates how processes of state recognition have played a role in reinforcing indigenous identities as being associated to land, in India, as well as many other indigenous contexts. As Merlan (2007: 144) describes regarding legal frameworks in indigenous Australia, land rights carry social implications for reinforcing identities. The tension that interventions intended to protect indigenous groups can perpetuate negative stereotypes is a key aspect of indigenous recognition and indigenous politics globally. It is an aspect of state recognition of which indigenous people themselves are acutely aware. Similarly, here, Arun's pre-eminent focus on ST: Koyas as shifting cultivators who embody their livelihood, and whose land rights he advocates, led him to carelessly presume an entitlement to Vignesh's seasonal produce. Confronted with this tension, Vignesh, unable to fathom the sudden imposition of obligations he associates with close kin, promptly left the house.

Although Arun and Vignesh belong to the same tribe and the same official category of identity, despite their affinity in the eyes of the state, they are socialized into such starkly different ways of interacting with others that conversation between them was strained. This example shows the breakdown in identification through misrecognition and demands a notion of relational recognition in which scales of integration and social class disaggregate the 'ST: Koya' identity. My emphasis on the relational aspect of recognition derives inductively from the close observation and participation in interactions where this label was deployed in varied, context-dependant ways. The term signals a subtle corrective to the ossified tone that pervades Povinelli, Coulthard, and Kapila's use of the term. Implicitly and autonomously, Vignesh rejected the form of recognition into which he was placed by Arun. Their different respective uses of the term ST: Koya, to identify and position each other, show how mobile and open

this signifier is, even as it implies something fixed, set, and undisputable. The stunted interaction was framed by the two men's projections of each other into relationally constituted frames of identification, which unfortunately could not capture the modes through which each actor felt recognized. This ethnography furthers scholarship on how state categories of recognition shape identities in India (Middleton 2015; Reddy 2005). Residues of colonial descriptors of caste and tribe are embedded in politics, development, affirmative action, and crucially intertwined with emic notions of community. What this article demonstrates is that even within a single community, the terms of address and use of identity categories are inconsistent, liable to shift through interactions.

Thinking with the notion that affirmative action in South Asia is a contested and productive field (Kapila 2008; Shah & Shneiderman 2013), the example shows the reach of official categories into informal interaction. The baggage of colonial-anthropological modes of recognition is audible in both Vignesh's self-identification (locating himself in an official cartography), and in Arun's expectation that immediately imposing the demand of close kinship would be welcomed. Arun and Vignesh's interaction exposes the subtle, *relational* ways in which community identification can oscillate between interlocutors through conversation. The category of ST: Koya recognition can be claimed as defining belonging, social status, and distinction, and simultaneously be understood as form of stigma, produced and reiterated between Koya people.

### **Affirmative action and the culturalization of 'ST' recognition**

Ethnographic perspectives inevitably move far beyond simply delineating positive or negative impacts of policy interventions (Higham & Shah 2013; Moodie 2013). Affirmative action policies in India ascribe and reify pre-existing identities, but also generate new forms of community consciousness (Chakrabarty 1995; Rodrigues 2005) as they seek to redress inequalities by reserving large proportions of seats in schools, universities, and state employment for 'STs', as for other so-called 'backwards classes' (Deshpande 2013).<sup>5</sup> These constitutional protections were designed to uplift historically marginalized sections of Indian society and were broadly intended to facilitate inclusion. Following Shah and Shneiderman (2013), and in dialogue with ethnographies of social mobility and affirmative action (Moodie 2015; Still 2014), 'flat' or homogenizing claims for recognition can exacerbate other forms of difference along class and gender lines as communities become integrated into regional caste society.

As Xaxa (2008) emphasizes, engaging Kuper (2003) and B  teille's (1986; 1998) critiques of indigenous identity, 'STs' are not a unified indigenous group but have been governed for several hundred years as if they were fundamentally different from neighbouring communities. Alongside integrative policies known in India as 'reservations', the 'STs' are also recipients of a different type of affirmative action, based on the recognition of their claim to territory. For 'STs', such as Koyas, legislation in Schedule V of the Indian Constitution has ensured protected access to land and forests and has encouraged them to live on their own terms, albeit with well-documented problems of implementation (Balagopal 2007). Hence, affirmative action for STs has two distinct aspects: one that seeks to integrate 'tribal' people into the larger nation; and one that preserves their autonomy, within an ideology of isolation. Many commentators emphasize one of these principles but overlook their co-presence in today's state-society

relationship in Adivasi areas. Paidipaty is an exception, noting that the 'two systems of constitutional protections were really at odds with one another' (2010: 93). This tension is also present in the awkward interaction above. In a wider national historical perspective, isolation and assimilation were the contours of the debate between Elwin (1944) and Ghurye (1943) who published an influential critique of static conceptions of India's 'tribal' people, accounting for complex migratory histories of the subcontinent. Re-reading colonial reports, Ghurye argued that 'autochthonous' rural populations, or 'so-called aboriginals' were on a single continuum with caste societies but had not sufficiently integrated into the Hindu fold.<sup>6</sup> He supported policies of assimilation rather than exclusion. Elwin advocated instead that central government should allow India's 'tribal' populations to adapt to modernity at their own pace (Elwin 1944; R. Guha 1996: 2379; S. Guha 1999), as a distinct society to be protected.

State recognition of Koyas as 'STs' is crucial as it preserves land rights under Schedule V of the constitution and 1/70 Land Transfer Regulation; the legacy of isolationist approaches are vital for the continuity of traditional material, religious, and social reproduction of Koya people. State recognition of Koyas as 'STs' also confers access to education, employment, and political representation, within affirmative action measures that putatively include and integrate Koyas. This places Koyas in a double-bind that is familiar from many indigenous contexts (Brown 2007; Burman 2003; Merlan 2009; Povinelli 2002). Appeals to, and mobilization around, state-enshrined categories, mean that authenticity must be recognized and adjudicated on externally. In the Indian context, as Middleton (2015: 74) has shown, this representational economy involves performing a narrative of distinctiveness: state ethnographers of the Anthropological Survey of India review the classifications of tribes to ascertain whether or not they constitute an 'ST', using the criteria of: 'primitive traits, distinctive culture, isolation, shyness of contact and backwardness' (Ambagudia 2011: 37; Middleton 2015: 96: 26-7). This classificatory framework is used to update state-based (sub-national) lists of 'STs', and leads to successful groups guarding their privileges for fear that widened access would result in fewer opportunities (Shneiderman & Turin 2006: 56). Kapila's (2008) work on the Gaddi reclassification as 'ST' in Himachal Pradesh makes explicit the reflexive and instrumental uses of possessing a distinctive culture, and the transactional ways in which contested classifications shape local politics.

The vignette above shows how judgements and classifications are made in real time, as members of an indigenous community recognize and situate each other relationally in their own respective frameworks of understanding. Exhibition of an essentialized 'distinctive culture' is key to 'ST' people's entitlement to state recognition and thereby to affirmative action and land protection – but it is also key to the ways people interact *with each other*, and the status they ascribe to one another within the Koya community. Kapila (2008: 121) explores an inherent contradiction in the definition and recognition of 'STs' as targets for development, while simultaneously 'protected as autochthones or Adivasis'. This culturalization of Adivasi and 'ST' identity is also highlighted by Banerjee's (2016) account of the a-historicization of their difference from other caste communities. Pressing this point further, I argue that an etic construct – the 'ST' category – has become central to emic understandings of cultural identity in the Koya context. Why, and with what consequences, do Koya people self-identify within the Indian state's terms of recognition, as 'STs'? Examples from Koya social interactions show the multivalence of processes of recognition, which continue away from the spheres of formal politics or community activism. As categories are redeployed

in everyday interactions, we observe wide oscillation in the uses to which they are put.

### **'ST' as relational and constructed identity**

The claim that an etic construct has become central to emic understandings of identity opens up debates on essentialism and constructivist accounts in other indigenous contexts. Studies of indigenous identities risk entering a double-bind where the complexity and nuance of fine-grained empirical research undermine identity-based claims and indigenous political agendas, a tension identified by Coulthard as the 'essentialism challenge' (2014: 21). Emphasizing situational differentiation within an indigenous group, we move beyond a trade-off between academic nuance and strategic essentialism. Constituents of the Koya community – aware of the double-edged potentiality of recognition within the 'ST' category – draw selectively on a variety of narratives of cultural identity in response to specific situations.

A key premise of scholarship on the politics of recognition, since Taylor's influential essay, is that groups of people define themselves in relation to characteristics that significant others acknowledge as salient (Coulthard 2014: 16; Taylor 1994). This framing downplays the full force of the power relations that determines which distinguishing features become relevant in defining such differences. It underemphasizes the straitjacketing of people into narrow 'cultural scripts' of what a person can be (Appiah 1994; 2018). Liberal discourses tend to ignore longer historical impacts of politics of recognition, drawing attention away from fluidity, complexity, and established power imbalances, as no one is ever reducible to the traits or characteristics that they are labelled with (Lyshaug 2004). Pushing back on the normative focus on honour and dignity that marks the literature, Fraser (2000; 2003) provides the critique that politics of recognition must be understood alongside politics of redistribution, which are often more urgent. Both recognition and redistribution are critical to Koya labourers, cultivators, and community advocates seeking out access to affirmative action measures which aim to level up material and cultural inequalities. Building on, and giving empirical texture to Fraser's and Coulthard's ideas, my ethnography shows how categories of recognition, which are essential for redistribution and social mobility, also serve to stigmatize by reiterating a perceived lack of economic integration. Occasionally Koya advocates display a form of resurgent recognition (à la Coulthard 2014) though Adivasis difference is hyper-politicized as a call for sovereignty beyond the framework of state recognition.

Social scientists have connected the recognition of castes and tribes in India to Hacking's concept of dynamic nominalism, the 'looping effect', through which the existence of a category can generate the sorts of behaviours described within it. Chakrabarty (1995: 3376), Kapila (2008: 130), Middleton (2015: 74), Mosse (2020: 22), and Reddy (2005: 555) have drawn these conceptual tools into research on South Asia, though the fullest anthropological consideration is Gellner's (2019: 267, 278) discussion of the instigated rise of sharper conceptions of ethnic groupings in Nepal. Foregrounding the agency of political actors who agitated for and stabilized ethnic political categories, Gellner's account is positioned as a corrective to the diminished scope of human agency in Actor Network Theory, while appreciating its strengths as a theorization of modernity. In the Koya case, I observe less community momentum, fewer exceptional individual leaders, and discern greater analytical weight on the inherited baggage of the categories of recognition themselves. Echoing Gellner, social

categories are 'made up', and individual actors have a role to play in negotiating and positioning themselves in relation to such social constructions. Yet ethnographic examples here illustrate the rhetorical force of long-established discursive regimes of characterization and recognition, which can be positively or negatively claimed or projected by individuals.

Natrajan (2012: 9) astutely notes that the constructivist turn was prefigured by B.R. Ambedkar in drafting the Indian constitution, which was explicitly designed to raise consciousness among protected communities. Dynamic nominalism resonates with Koya activists like Arun, who campaign passionately for another 'ST' community, the Lambadas, to be removed from the 'ST' list as they are 'already' economically advanced and not authentically Adivasi. The critiques of Koya advocates reiterate the state vision of entitlement tied to 'backwardness'. The more competitively 'ST' status is contested, the more beneficiaries ringfence and embody their genuine entitlement to that classification (Kapila 2008). My ethnography bears out that affirmative action is crucial for Koya people, over generations, to develop conceptions of their community as autonomous and discrete from others. Through being categorized as 'ST', a process that involves self-identification within state-affirmed categories of difference, Koya people in turn make further claims on the state. This accentuates cognisance of Koya distinctness in a 'looping effect'. This recognition valorizes an authentic difference, entitling Koya people to benefits that facilitate further assimilation.

Drawing on the intellectual genealogy of Natrajan's work on culturalization, grounded in critical caste studies, I argue that the wider push and pull of affirmative action that both includes and excludes, reifies the distinct corporate identity of Koyas, as an a-historicized caste/tribe group, that are increasingly pressured to compete with other groups for resources. But this ossification of the group identity is always incomplete. As Koya communities partially integrate into the wider economy and caste society of the region, and behave as an interest group in some aspects, they navigate divergent reference points for their group identity. The two faces of affirmative action are reflected in processes of Koya identification: some aim for inclusion in economic networks that promise broader horizons of consumption based on new income streams; others invest labour in the inter-family provision of the produce of *sainda* cultivation, such as corn, gourds, and pumpkins, that can be brought to relatives who do not have access to a hill-slope. Livelihoods are evaluated based on widespread internalization of the values of state recognition, as the 'ST' category provides cultural reference points for Adivasis as they are excluded and included. Beyond simply applying Hacking's argument to the Koya case, I suggest this form of recognition, counterpoised with processes of assimilation, provides a yardstick for finer-grained distinctions within the community.

### Disaggregating integration

Sumit Guha's (2013) historical treatise on caste and power in South Asian societies foregrounds the critical purchase of transactionalist theories in anthropology (Barth 1969; Marriott 1965) for understanding the distribution of power in the caste system. Since Barth's (1969) classic argument, it is well established that ethnic differences become clarified through contact, which allows boundaries to be established and redrawn relationally. As materialist histories of these caste/tribe differences elaborate, we also need to confront class as an axis of difference in the Koya community, which surfaced prominently in the interaction between Vignesh and Arun.

We observed how collectively held notions of 'ST' difference circulate into everyday evaluations and distinctions, operating as a measure of authenticity. The anthropological typology of Indian 'tribes' was core to colonial-ethnographic classification (Bates 1995; Paidipaty 2010), while division into subgroups of socio-economic class became an established rubric of analysis. Both Furer-Haimendorf and Elwin, pre-eminent ethnographers of Central and Eastern India, advocated for variegated policy interventions to address the disaggregated integration of 'tribes', and endorsed enhanced protections for 'tribal' land, and wrote with anguish about unimpeded assimilation, which remains today an influential paradigm at a local level.<sup>7</sup> Their respective legacies are associated with over-romanticized ideas of 'tribal' India, though both were attentive to the competing needs for material protection at the level of policy and law, and broader forms of respectability and representation.

In Elwin's *The aboriginals* (1944), four 'classes' are devised. The first are protected by geographical conditions from the 'debasing contacts of the plains' (1944: 8) who live a 'largely communal life [and] still share'. For them, shifting cultivation is more than a form of agriculture, it is a way of life: 'they cannot visualize existence without it' (1944: 9). The second 'class' have 'become more individualistic ... no longer share', and among them there are 'distinctions between rich and poor'. Elwin's description of separate compounds, rather than houses adjoining communal space, is observable in the changing geography of Koya villages in Andhra Pradesh. Where shifting cultivation is practised, houses face a common area which is the ritual centre of the village. Increasingly, as livelihoods move away from *sainda* cultivation and become more dependent on precarious migrant labour, and household collection of forest produce for sale, separate compounds face separate natural resources.

Third in Elwin's schema are the victims of culture contact, who become comprehensively dispossessed of their land and culture but do not receive the benefits of integration (1944: 12).<sup>8</sup> Elwin diagnoses a 'decay' of 'tribal' cultural life and an evisceration of 'tribal' autonomy. In the midst of forgotten myths, neglected gods, and abandoned hunting and cultivation practices, 'tribal life and tradition have begun to appear slightly ludicrous, *even to the tribesmen themselves*' (1944: 13, emphasis added). The passage appears visionary given the ways 'tribal' culture has become essentialized in external facing political representations. The fourth 'class' of aboriginals are the 'tribal' aristocracy who retained ancestral privileges, names, and totems, while adopting Hindu faith and living 'with every modern comfort [whose] well-stocked library includes the works of Aldous Huxley, Bernard Shaw and Malinowski' (1944: 10-11). Although there are some who claim, based on their *intiperu* (surname group), that they are 'original' Adivasi nobles, such examples are very rare. One such person, who boasts an authentic Gondi-Koya surname, is Arun Maravi.

From Elwin's account, it appears that an original difference was a fundamental attribute of 'tribal' society, which could be reduced or erased through contact. The paradigm of isolation-assimilation remains sharply relevant and forms a framework through which many Koyas today evaluate their communities' situation and future. The notion of a tribe/caste continuum (Bailey 1960) has filtered through academic and administrative accounts to dominate contemporary popular understandings of 'tribes' and Adivasis, rooted in a teleological modernization theory in which societies move from simple to complex. Anthropology itself is intrinsically implicated in the production of such a narrative. As we see below, the categories that have been

disseminated into everyday Koya and Telugu parlance have the stamp of outdated anthropological ideas and intersect in complex ways with processes of classing and local notions of assimilation. Thinking with Elwin's disaggregation, I turn to consider how frameworks of difference, and degrees of assimilation, coalesce in contemporary articulations.

### Contexts of recognition: village, town, government hospital

Differences within the Koya community are starkly highlighted in contexts where state categories determine entitlement to resources, such as public healthcare provision. In Illuru village, Lokesh's mother, Pochamma, received basic training as a volunteer health worker to administer medicines and test for malaria. Beyond Illuru, the primary health centre ten kilometres away is the closest node of state healthcare, but also the least reliable. For more dependable care, Illuru villagers travel thirty-five kilometres to the hospital at Rampachodavaram, while serious problems result in trips to government hospitals in the cities of Rajahmundry and Kakinada ninety-five and 120 kilometres away. When Lokesh brought his wife, Lalitha, to Illuru, she was unaccustomed to the workload of hill-slope cultivation, and regularly fell seriously ill with a very high fever. The couple travelled to the government hospital at Kakinada where Lalitha was diagnosed with malaria and jaundice. The doctor – according to the couple – gave her priority as she came from the 'tribal' area. Lalitha was born into the Padmashali caste, who are not an 'ST' group but officially recognized as 'Other Backward Classes'. Her actual caste identity was irrelevant: she simply passed as 'ST', as the *wife* of her husband Lokesh, though the couple had not formalized their marriage at this point. Lokesh carried a photocopy of *his* caste certificate, that proves his 'ST: Koya' identity. For a person identifying as 'ST' to benefit from these advantages, they must have claimed that identity through formal bureaucratic channels in order to acquire the caste certificate. However, in the hospital the 'ST' identity of Lokesh and Lalitha was assumed and never verified. Proof of this status and accompanying entitlements operates here at the level of inter-subjective judgement, as an assumption, based on linguistic diction, comportment, and appearance.

There is no affirmative action policy that mandates a doctor to privilege the emergency healthcare for an 'ST' patient above others in a hospital setting. I suspect she was prioritized because of the immediate severity of her illness, but the fact that experiences are couched in these terms is suggestive of how they are understood, and of the frameworks that produce them. Lokesh and Lalitha accept the jurisdiction of state categories to distinguish people and inform who is given priority, or treated as a competitor for resources. In general, their assessments corresponded with official caste categories. Legal injunctions have blurred boundaries, but here exists an implicit understanding that the category 'ST' represents a marker that is beyond individual discretion and judgement, hence it was taken as self-evident. Conversely, where bureaucratic processes are placed under numerical strain, burdens of proof do become central to debates about who should be entitled.

As Lalitha recovered slowly from her illness, and Lokesh slept on the floor of the hospital ward, camaraderie developed between neighbouring patients of different caste backgrounds. Class and caste distinctions were temporarily transcended: treats from outside the ward were shared; small favours given and received; fictive kinship terms were used to address the family of the adjacent patient. Yet affinities fostered while cohabiting this space of mutual dependency were not maintained beyond the

immediate interaction, and the narrative of caste difference was never far removed. Privately Lokesh and Lalitha expressed to me that they were very different from those with well-resourced networks of relatives living closer to the city. They insinuated that those marginally better-off people – whom they caricatured as *dubkuwarlu* (cash people, [Telugu]) or *berrelōr* (big people, [Koya]) – had fewer understanding of hardships, little knowledge of agriculture, a different ‘culture’ (*vāru samskriti vaire*) and a different caste (*jāti*).

Just as they feel different to ‘bigger’ people with more cash than themselves, Lokesh and Lalitha differentiate themselves from the *cinna nar mansud* (small village people) from similar socio-economic backgrounds who are less adept at navigating their ‘ST’ status. In parallel to Frøystad’s (2005: 269) ethnography, Koyas ‘constantly classify people as either above, on a par with, or inferior to themselves’, distinctions that map onto caste affiliation. In a Barthian sense, self-ascriptions are produced through boundary-making, by othering those who are different.

Small village people, Lokesh told me, were unaware of healthcare options available to them and would come to the hospital only when symptoms were severe. Lokesh’s family, by contrast, pre-empt serious illness and seek medical care at the earliest opportunity. He describes most of his own village as ‘small’ in these terms (*cinna nar mansud*). At the extreme end of this polarization, Lalitha believes her own mother-in-law Pochamma to be small-minded, ‘backwards’, and *tappu* (wrong) in many of her habits: she drinks alcohol, leaves children to work alone, and is not clean and economically rational in ways that Lalitha sees as important. Even though Pochamma herself is a volunteer health worker, and therefore embedded in the state’s provisions of biomedical treatment and advice, she is still – in Lalitha’s perspective – a small village person. Frøystad (2005: 4) elaborates how the process of objectifying and evaluating caste or religious groups as a yardstick for community self-making is constant in Hindu North India, while specific ‘others’ may shift as socially or politically expedient. Similarly in Andhra Pradesh, people and community characteristics are essentialized and hierarchized relationally, and established as ‘good’, ‘big’, and ‘clean’, relative to others who are not.

Within the hospital, Lalitha and Lokesh perceived themselves as benefitting from preferential treatment to which they are entitled as people with ‘ST’ identity, though Lokesh would not wish to be constrained by the label elsewhere. He is an ambitious young man, who through his aspirations, consumption habits, and choice of spouse, transcended the social status of the village – and wants to be recognized as such. One of four villagers to pass tenth grade standard (equivalent to GCSEs), he has migrated for work, married outside his community, and fostered relations with local businessmen, thus cultivating a personhood that fits the regional lower-middle class. Lokesh is an example of the success of affirmative action in both senses alluded to above. He exercises *de facto* autonomy over his ancestrally cultivated forest land, completed school, and strives to access welfare.

Yet there remains a gulf between him and his non-tribal peers in how confidently he conducts his agricultural business, how assertively he bargains over the price of his crops, and how assertively he would nominate himself for a labouring opportunity in a situation where caste identities were clearly stratified. He has benefitted from affirmative action, but internalizes the terms of this inclusion, aware that he needs additional support in a world of ‘cash’ people. With inclusion, opportunity, and entitlement comes an affirmation of something radically different, to which the ‘ST’ classifier is only a referent. This difference is described by some Adivasis, but not by Lokesh, just

as the colonial ethnographers of South India concluded – as something profoundly ‘aboriginal’. For people identifying as ‘STs’ like Lokesh, operationalizing that identity requires a reflexive awareness of the institutionalized nature of their difference, which appears in the hospital as a kind of advantage or value to be extracted – in lieu of the potential value of a local caste network that others possess. In doing so, and through his aspersions cast upon other people, Lokesh accepts a world-view that implicitly grades people relative to their caste/tribe, and to a teleological notion of community status. Compared to his ‘small’ village kin, Lokesh’s competence mobilizing ‘ST’ status signals inclusion into the bureaucratized spaces of the state, in which entitlement is tied to backwardness and requires formal recognition.

The ‘ST’ category is made visible to mobilize entitlement encased in a two-letter acronym, which Lokesh, in certain contexts, embraces with opportunistic verve. He remains sharply aware that this is a misrecognition of other aspects of his personhood, of his dignity and seniority over other relatives. Lokesh switches between conceptualizing himself in a difference-blind level playing field of social mobility, a meritocracy in which his achievements are his own, and a difference-aware setting where that difference can be traded as a transactional asset legitimately entitling him to preferential treatment.

### **Relational recognition, assimilation, and integration**

Threading forward these observations in connection with debates on assimilation, and recalling Elwin’s graded classifications, we can conceive of Lokesh as someone who is skilled in navigating regimes of recognition and identification. He astutely declined the invitation to enter the house of Arun. Vignesh and Arun are constrained in their frameworks for recognizing each other. Arguably, Vignesh inhabits a different, ‘less-assimilated’ class than Arun. The pumpkin signifies a bond of close kinship that Vignesh deems inappropriate, and therefore patronizing. In Appiah’s (1994) terms, it straitjackets him, as a cultural script that allows Arun to impose himself unilaterally, leaving no opportunity for a counter-recognition or a repudiation.

But what experiences and positionality does a person require to competently oscillate between such frameworks? What enables people like Lokesh to flexibly overcome the limits of formal objectification of his tribe? What enables Arun to objectify Koya identity so far that he is unable to present a more relatable disposition? Is there interpretative space for us to hold out for the possibility that Arun is in fact engaging in a resurgent politics of recognition (Coulthard 2014: 24), but that this is lost on Vignesh, who aspires to partially assimilate rather than to be recognized as an authentic Adivasi?

Elwin foresaw in the 1940s that ‘tribal life would appear slightly ludicrous, *even to the tribesmen themselves*’ (1944: 13, emphasis added). This ‘slightly ludicrous’ appearance is a complex internalization of negative stereotyping, ingrained over time. Entering the inter-caste spaces of towns and cities, where they are ethnically marked as ‘tribal’, villagers have to navigate their difference, sharply aware of how they appear to others.

Dilemmas around assimilation have become a framework through which Adivasi communities evaluate their own experiences and aspirations. Young Koya people from Illuru struggle to move from relative autonomy and geographical and economic isolation, to positions of respectability, without passing through the degrading gaze of more assimilated parts of their own community. Even those who are ostensibly advocates for their cultural and economic well-being, fail to offer the recognition they seek. In such scenarios the concept of relational recognition gains purchase as it

foregrounds how situated actors opt in and out of deploying the recognition framework of assimilation and integration to identify affinity with each other or claim access to resources.

As affirmative action enables some Koyas to receive Telugu-medium education, to migrate for work, and train as advocates, it reiterates the essentialization of Koya people, which determines relations between different parts of the community. Alongside the substantialization of caste groups into individuated cultural blocks competing for political and economic resources (Fuller 1996: 12, 26), Adivasi groups like the Koyas – through engaging in a politics of recognition – develop a heightened awareness of themselves as culturally distinct, and ‘smaller’ than others. Difference has become a commodity that can be transacted to claim entitlement and preserve autonomy through engagement with the infrastructure of state categories, a process in which stigma seems unavoidable.

### Conclusion: the limits of ‘ST’ affinity

Debates on the politics of recognition need to acknowledge the layered complexity in how constituents within any single community self-identify. Retaining a critical focus on recognition, ethnography offers insight into the trajectory and circulation of categories as they gain cultural and political currency in different scenarios. The struggle for redistribution in Adivasi South India demands a sharper awareness of how recognition operates not only through state categories like ‘ST’, but also through individuals’ situated interpolation within those loaded categories. Vignesh introduced himself as ‘ST: Koya’, was caricatured as having unfulfilled pastoral and familial obligations to Arun, yet retained the autonomy to leave, and reject the hospitality he was offered. His positionality is at once spontaneous, rebellious, and subjective, exhibiting an agency recognizable as Adivasi, but also indicating a sensitivity, masculinity, and relationality that exceeds the politics of identity or recognition.

The analysis contributes to anthropology an exposition of how socially constructed state categories accumulate vernacular leverage and rhetorical power that exceeds anthropological critique. Hacking’s looping effect captures the productive potential and social life of categories, but the reality of state-mediated caste/tribe difference highlights the fluidity of even the most fixed identity markers. Social anthropologists have discussed caste/tribe as an ascribed identity that is historically and politically constructed – that we might yet mobilize to overcome – while in other contexts it is taken as an indigenous framework for social organization. The interactions between Lokesh, Lalitha, Vignesh, and Arun probe an unanswered tension around the status we give to caste/tribe difference even when disaggregated by class and degrees of respective ‘integration’.

A focus on recognition allows an insight into an implicit but underemphasized distinction in the literature on caste/tribe difference, between caste/tribe as externally given, or ascribed, and caste/tribe as lived or experienced. Koya people recognize themselves as belonging to their community both through externally given categories of differentiation as well as through indigenous kinship and patronage. These interactions contain the residues of colonial anthropological knowledge that are bolstered by post-independence ethnicization and politicization. But these caste/tribe distinctions cannot be passed off as *merely* constructed, as a narrow ‘identity politics’. As Menon (2006: 6) has suggested, we cannot allow the ‘ontology of caste to become nothing more than an

effect of governmentality'. The differences implied are also embodied and substantiated in daily social relations, and provide a framework for family life.

This article uses interpersonal interactions to show how caste/tribe difference is understood and embodied across a network of people, each in their own web of social hierarchies and material concerns. It is through the relational recognition and identification of others, who are placed into already constituted frameworks, that individual actors make sense of the intermeshing of local kinships ties, governmental categories, class, gender, and status distinctions that can unite or differentiate people from one from another. This clarifies the challenge for anthropologists working in contexts of overdetermined social identities, like caste/tribe: to dispel the presumption of compatibility between identities as they are ascribed, vis-à-vis how they are experienced and reiterated through social relations with other people.

At a quotidian level, the state's categorizations of Koyas as 'ST' filter into everyday interactions. The promise of inclusion as 'ST' marks those who claim such advantages as fundamentally different, an outcome of waves of contradictory policy, which have unfolded in a manner that neither Elwin nor Ghurye could have imagined. Though we can be critical of Arun's charmless demand for a pumpkin, in his misrecognition of Vignesh, there is an invitation to a mode of recognition beyond the hierarchy of assimilation. A generous reading of Arun's politics would posit that he was evoking a resurgent politics of recognition – extending to Vignesh a fictive kinship of utopian proportions, as relatives do who indeed share cultural reference points. Sadly, the dominant frameworks of assimilation and stigmatization prevented Vignesh from accepting such an invitation to envision relatedness across the evident gulf in status. The situated and relational nature of recognition instructs us to remain sensitive to the contingencies of identification. Like all social constructions the class, caste, and tribe distinctions exposed between these two men have very tangible effects.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Marriott (1965: 2–3) noted, 'indigenous terms for "caste" and "tribe" are frequently interchangeable or identical'.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'Scheduled Tribes' and Adivasi overlap in many cases but are not synonyms. Adivasi is a neologism used by Christian missionaries in 1930s Jharkhand to forge solidarity against colonial powers (Hardiman 1987: 13; Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011: 1; Shah 2010: 15). Broadly accepted as a more open-ended recognition of Indian indigeneity – outside the state's framework of recognition – Adivasi denotes a self-identification as an original inhabitant, signifying a re-engagement with histories of resistance while simultaneously highlighting something 'aboriginal' (Banerjee 2006: 105). For most Western-trained scholars (e.g., Moodie 2015; Shah 2010), Adivasi is a more appropriate term compared to the outdated 'tribal' or the state-centred 'Scheduled Tribe'.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used for individuals and villages in this article. Names of market towns are retained.

<sup>4</sup> Representations of Adivasis in popular Telugu culture essentialize their association with nature, for example, the film, *Adavi Biddalu* (Children of the forest) by Narayan Murthy (2006).

<sup>5</sup> These are defined as Backwards Castes, Scheduled Castes, Other Backwards Classes, and Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>6</sup> Dirks suggested Ghurye's work was an influence on Redfield and Lewis, rather than vice versa (2013: 246).

<sup>7</sup> Fürer-Haimendorf is revered today in parts of Telangana, and Telugu translations of his book *Struggle for survival* (1982) adorn Koya activists' bookshelves.

<sup>8</sup> This description mirrors land alienation described in Oskarsson (2018) and Umamaheshwari (2014).

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## « Pourquoi ne nous as-tu pas apporté de citrouille ? » Reconnaissance relationnelle de la caste, de la classe et de la tribu dans les zones rurales de l'Andhra Pradesh (Inde)

### Résumé

L'article analyse comment des caractéristiques associées au statut de « *Scheduled Tribe* » (ST) en Inde orientent des actes relationnels situés soit vers la déférence envers son vis-à-vis, soit vers un a priori de supériorité. L'ethnographie montre comment, dans une communauté autochtone adivasi, les traits qui déterminent l'identification au sein du groupe génèrent des sentiments de privilège et de stigmatisation et créent un cadre pour établir les différences de statut assignées à autrui : égalité, supériorité ou infériorité. L'ethnographie des interactions entre des membres d'une communauté « ST » met en lumière le processus interpellatif d'acteurs sociaux qui passent leur temps à se situer mutuellement sur des schémas d'association et de parenté constitués subjectivement et influencés par des discours de classification plus anciens. Le matériel éclaire la manière dont les caractéristiques associées aux identités « ST » qui sont valorisées dans un contexte peuvent être stigmatisées dans un autre, ce qui suggère que la littérature sur la politique de la reconnaissance doit accorder davantage d'attention à la variabilité de ces cadres en fonction du contexte dans différents espaces.

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