

Abstract for the Job talk for IISER Mohali

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The title of my thesis is “Making Tribal Places: The Agency tracts of Andhra region, c. 1860-1950 and its focus was on the nature of intervention made by the colonial state into the forest regions of Andhra of colonial Madras Presidency (which were referred as the ‘Agency Tracts’ in the administrative parlance) and the redrawing of these spaces into spaces of ‘tribal’ exceptionalism. My own findings show that the category of ‘tribals’ was a result of complex socio-economic processes that were unleashed by the colonial administration. It was the extraction of limited revenue, alternative practices of livelihoods to settled agriculture along with its racial theories, that led to the creation of tribal as an administrative category. From the late 19th century, the colonial state began to perceive forest landscapes as ‘resources’ waiting for exploitation even as the tribals were dubbed as ‘primitive’, docile and ‘innocent’ to re-order these spaces. The template for external intervention into these regions in the name of ‘development’ laid during the colonial period continues to operate even in the present.

As an extension of my thesis work, I am currently working on a research project with tentative title “Entangled Histories of Fields and Forests: Agrarian Change and Tribal Livelihoods in Andhra Pradesh, c. 1950 to the present. The project is about the story of democratization of forests in general and about the legislation called the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in particular. The Government of India has enacted FRA in 2006 to correct the historical injustice that was meted out to the tribals by giving them rights over lands in their possession before 13th Dec 2005 and to aid the process of forest conservation. However, the act, led to fresh clearing of forests in few states like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. My current research tries to explain this paradox by situating the legislation in the regional forest/environmental histories. It uses the FRA as an optic to look at the changing patterns of resource use in forest regions on one hand, and on the other, to understand the dynamics of political participation and mobilisation in adivasi dominated forest regions. These dynamics are central to understanding the fate of forests in India.

I would like to introduce a course with a tentative title “Environmental Histories of India—Past and Present” that deals with the environmental histories of India, which intends to provide an understanding of the history of India from an environmental perspective. The course offers a comparative perspective of natural resources management in colonial period and independent India.