

Adivasi Women, Agrarian Change and Forms of Labour in Neo-liberal India

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Abstract

This article elaborates the different dimensions of the gendered nature of semi-proletarianization and proletarianization of the adivasi social groups after the period of neo-liberal reforms. It shows that the integration of the adivasis in general, and adivasi women in particular, has been a result of agrarian distress and macro-economic trends that have structured the patterns of dispossession, displacement and urbanization in the last two decades. In doing so, the article contradicts the view which holds that communitarian structures have been playing an important part in the division of labour within adivasi communities. This article also contests the view that there is an autonomous sphere of existence of the subsistence economy of the adivasis and that the role of the adivasi women is largely confined to unpaid labour within the sphere of subsistence. As the analysis here shows, the blurred boundaries between subsistence and commercial activities have ensured that there is hardly autonomous space for the adivasi households to carry out their activities, which has several implications for the life of adivasi women. Lastly, the article counters the oft-repeated proposition that communities and communitarian structures can stand in opposition to the labour market and protect the interests of the adivasi women if

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they are democratized. It is shown here that both matrilineal and patrilineal communities have similar degrees of semi-proletarianization and proletarianization of adivasi women, although such a process is influenced by regional trends and landholding patterns. Thus, the thesis that communitarian production and distribution systems guide the class formation process does not, in fact, hold in the case of most adivasi regions. Rather, the labour market is guided by macro-economic processes that often neutralize the influence of these structures.

Keywords

Adivasi women, neo-liberalism, proletarianization, labour market, landholding patterns

Introduction

This article addresses the changing forms of labour amongst adivasi women in the context of agrarian transformations in neo-liberal India. ‘Adivasi’ is a politically charged term and a form of self-expression used by ‘tribes’ which have been protesting against their own exploitation and marginalization for the last two centuries. In constitutional terms, many of the groups describing themselves as ‘adivasis’ are also known as Scheduled Tribes.¹ Their trajectory of development has been ridden with processes that have led to their historical semi-proletarianization since the time of colonial capitalism. This has been a long process, entailing the dispossession of adivasis from their lands and their integration into the labour market under different stages of capitalism. While reviewing the debates and the processes of contemporary proletarianization and semi-proletarianization² of adivasi people, this article shows that there has been a qualitative change and intensification of these phenomena in the last three decades. One of the most significant differences between earlier times and the present has been the gendered nature of the processes of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization.

The impact of state-led processes of dispossession and urbanization of adivasi households has been fundamentally characterized by changes in the labouring patterns of adivasi women. Scholarship on the character of this impact has largely ignored the gender dimension because it has taken a rather romantic view of the status of adivasi women in their communities. In such an analysis, community has been given greater prominence than class in the determination of the division of labour.

Thus, prominent scholars have suggested that adivasi societies do not fit into a prototype classification of peasantry and proletariat; their division of labour is determined through communitarian principles and customary laws (Agarwal, 2010).³ The position of women is located by anthropologists within such customary laws, and it is suggested that adivasi women have enjoyed equal status with their male counterparts in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies. This has implications for understanding the division of labour within adivasi societies. From this perspective, community structures are democratic and egalitarian and have a fundamental role in structuring the division of labour and the functions performed by women (Kelkar, Nathan & Walter, 2005). Community structures are also seen as deterrents to the adverse integration of adivasi people into the labour markets. This argument forms the core of the anthropological and historical work on adivasis today. However, the analysis in this article shows that this conclusion may not be valid: Communitarian structures have little bearing on the division of labour in contemporary times. Rather, the penetration of the labour market in adivasi societies has been structured by macro-economic processes of dispossession and the two-decade-long agrarian crisis. The position of women is fundamentally affected by these factors (Prasad, 2010).

The second strand of scholarship, whose arguments are reviewed and contested by this essay, states that there is something in the form of a 'household subsistence' as an autonomous mode of production that has escaped both feudalism and capitalism. The ability of this household subsistence economy to reproduce itself has structured the agrarian transition of intermediate classes which, according to this view, retained their control over both capital and labour. Thus, autonomous spaces have been created and the social structures within such systems have not been altered much by the penetration of capital. Hence, these authors conclude that capitalism does not exist within adivasi societies and that they are only integrated into the larger system through 'circuits of capital' (Shah, 2013). Such an argument has similarities with the previous perspective that privileges community structures as the foundation of the division of labour. Since adivasi household subsistence economies enjoy an autonomous space, they also retain the authority to structure the division of labour according to community norms. This creates an advantageous position for women, since communitarian structures are inherently more egalitarian than the labour market.

However, as will be shown here, such an understanding is fraught with historical inaccuracies and misreads the way in which capital moulds the labour process in local economies. It ignores the larger

dialectic between agrarian societies and political processes which lead to dispossession and accumulation. These processes are fundamental to structuring the integration of adivasi people into the labour markets. In this sense, ‘social structures of accumulation’ (Harris-White, 2013) are not independent of class relations and play a limited role in influencing the division of labour in the current times. Hence, while patriarchy, religion and caste may be mediators in the capital–labour relationship, they are not necessarily autonomous of the class-based structures of accumulation. Rather, they form different layers of overlapping structures of accumulation and generate their own politics vis-à-vis the state. This article shows that the position of adivasi women is integrally related to this process of mediation and commercialization of subsistence which determines and influences their integration into circuits of capital through the labour market.

This article is divided into four parts. The first section explores the agrarian distress and increased patterns of dispossession that have occurred due to the neo-liberal reforms. In the context, the role of communitarian institutions in structuring the division of labour is explored in the second section. Using examples from both patrilineal and matrilineal communities, the article contests the view of egalitarian communitarian structures and shows that the traditional division of labour within these social groups lays the foundations for their adverse integration into the labour market in the pre-neo-liberal period. Following this, the third section analyzes the question of property rights and structural inequalities, with particular focus on women. This section particularly problematizes the relationship between women and control over land. In this sense, the different patterns of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization of adivasi women are influenced by both broad macro-economic processes and these structural inequalities which have been largely ignored in the literature so far (Kothari & Srivastava, 2012; Padel & Das, 2010). The state-level decadal census of 2001 and 2011 is used to analyze the changing occupational structure in adivasi societies and locates the gendered pattern of adivasi proletarianization and semi-proletarianization within this context. In particular, it focuses on the structure of the labour market and the participation of adivasis, particularly adivasi women. Within this broad framework of gendered labour participation, the last section of this article follows the changes in the labouring patterns of different patrilineal and matrilineal communities using census data for individual ‘Scheduled Tribes’. The analysis is used to interrogate the argument that social and communitarian structures still play an important role in structuring the division of labour in adivasi societies.

Neo-liberalism, Agrarian Distress and the Patterns of Dispossession

The advent of neo-liberal reforms from the early 1990s was based on four policy initiatives that influenced a three-decade-long agrarian crisis and the patterns of labour in adivasi regions. First, the removal of subsidies for agricultural inputs by a neo-liberal state and of quantitative trade restrictions in all agricultural products changed the very nature of agricultural production. The cost of agricultural production increased substantially, and this resulted in indebtedness leading to more than two million farmers' suicides since the mid-1990s. Furthermore, the deceleration of agricultural growth has also led to a lack of decent jobs in the agricultural sector, thus severely impacting on the prospects of adivasi workers, particularly women, who largely depended on neighbourhood work for paid employment. This displacement of livelihoods is one of the essential elements which propelled an increasing number of women into casual wage labour (Padhi, 2012; Prasad, 2010).

The second important factor has been the paradigm shift in natural resource and land management. One of the main features for these environmental regulations was the change they effected in the land use pattern by allowing big projects inside adivasi regions, which were predominantly forested areas. The diversion of forestlands for non-forest purposes altered the pattern of land use and influenced the trend of growing landlessness. The area of forestland diverted for large industrial projects increased from about 21,000 hectares per annum in 1990–1999 to about 71,000 hectares per annum in 2006–2008. This increasing pace of diversion created its own patterns of dispossession and landlessness. The number of adivasi households which had no access to cultivated land increased from 32.1 per cent in 1999–2000 to 38.4 per cent in 2011–2012. At the same time, the number of landholdings below 1 hectare decreased from 42.2 to 38.7 per cent and the landholdings between 1 and 2 hectares also decreased from 16.2 to 14 per cent between 1999–2000 and 2011–2012. This shows the growing inequity within the adivasi societies. The regional variations in the pattern of differentiation are shown in Table 1.

The diverse patterns of dispossession influence the trends of semi-proletarianization and influence women's labour in the post-reforms period. The data in Table 1 show that there is a clear divide between the patterns in the northeast, central and eastern India. The mineral states of Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh have also seen a spurt in landlessness. The most significant differentiation is seen in the state of

Table I. Patterns of Access to Cultivated Land, 1999–2012

State	Percentage of ST Population	Percentage Change in Access to Cultivated Land (in hectares)					
		Landless	0.01–0.40	0.41–1	1.01–2	2.01–4	Above 4
Chhattisgarh	30.6	–0.2	4.5	3.9	6.1	–11.7	–2.7
Gujarat	14.8	4.8	–16	11.5	–1.9	–2.7	–1.1
Jharkhand	26.2	14.5	7.6	–25.9	–5.8	–1.2	0.1
Madhya Pradesh	21.1	11.9	–5.9	–2.3	1.3	–3.1	–1.8
Maharashtra	9.4	–0.5	5.6	–2.8	–6.5	1.7	2.5
Odisha	22.8	6.4	–5.7	–0.6	–1.3	0.8	0.5
Rajasthan	13.5	5.8	3.4	–8.8	–1.9	0.2	1.4
Arunachal Pradesh	68.8	8.7	–12.1	–9	7.2	8	4.2
Assam	12.4	18	–4.1	–13.4	–2.2	1.8	–0.1
Manipur	35.1	14.3	–13.8	–3	1.3	0.2	1
Meghalaya	86.1	14.2	7.7	–8.4	–11.8	–1.5	–0.3
Mizoram	94.5	10.6	2.3	6.6	–16.1	–3.4	0
Nagaland	86.5	0	9	1.8	–17.9	4.1	2.9
Tripura	33.1	–1.6	–1.8	3.4	0.7	–0.7	0
All India	8.2	6.5	–1.5	–3	–2.2	0.6	–0.3

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSSO, *Employment and Unemployment Survey amongst Social Groups*.

Arunachal Pradesh, where the increase in landlessness is accompanied with an increase in the number of landholders with above 2 hectares of land. Within this broad trend, there is a third tendency in states such as Gujarat and Chhattisgarh which have seen a spurt in marginal landholdings. This largely indicates changing agrarian relations, especially with the adoption of commercial and corporate farming in these regions by the state governments (Mehta, 2005; Prasad, 2014).

The third important feature of agrarian change has been the rapid process of urbanization. The census data for 2011 clearly show that the decadal rate of growth of urban population amongst the Scheduled Tribes

has been higher than the overall growth of Scheduled Tribe population between 2001 and 2011.

Table 2 shows that the decadal rate of growth of the adivasi population in the urban areas is almost twice that of the adivasi population in the rural areas. It is also significantly higher than the decadal growth rates of the population at the state level. This clearly indicates a rapid pace of urbanization which has influenced and structured the changes within rural India.

The fourth trend which exemplifies the agrarian distress and its impacts on forms of adivasi labour is household migration. As the latest migration data show, the number of Scheduled Tribe migrant households in urban areas increased from 2.9 to 6 per cent between 2001 and 2011.

Table 2. Decadal Growth in Urban Adivasi Population, 2001–2011

State	Percentage of Adivasi Population	Decadal Growth in Population		
		Total	Rural	Urban
Chhattisgarh	30.6	18.2	15.4	68.2
Gujarat	14.8	19.2	16.8	45.7
Jharkhand	26.2	22	21	32.3
Madhya Pradesh	21.1	25.2	24.7	32.1
Maharashtra	9.4	22.5	20.3	37.9
Odisha	22.8	17.7	16.8	33.4
Rajasthan	13.5	30.2	29.4	43.6
Arunachal Pradesh	68.8	35	30.3	63.8
Assam	12.4	17.4	16.2	42.2
Manipur	35.1	21.8	12.1	216.8
Meghalaya	86.1	28.3	27	35.1
Mizoram	94.5	23.4	17.8	29.4
Nagaland	86.5	-3.6	-15.4	75.7
Tripura	33.1	17.5	15.5	93.7
All India	8.2	23.7	21.3	49.7

Source: Census of India (2011), highlights of census data, Scheduled Tribes.

This rise in household migration has usually been interpreted as associational migration (or migration for marriage) by women (NSSO, 2010, p. 17). However, a recent survey shows that almost all women migrating to the city are also forced to look for work even if the main reason for their migration may be associational. The survey found that about a third of all female long-term migrants were looking for work in the areas in which they migrated. The survey also shows that at least 59 per cent of the circular short-term migrants were women workers (Agnihotri, Mazumdar & Neetha, 2013, p. 5). These data indicate that the level of migration of adivasi women is a substantial proportion of all women migrants. Also, the increase in household migration shows that agrarian distress has led to a drying up of agricultural employment and labour mobility, the patterns of which are yet to be fully explained.

Communitarian Institutions and the Labour Processes

The developments within the agrarian economy outlined above contextualize the contemporary debates on the status of women and the nature of the division of labour within adivasi communities. Anthropological and sociological approaches have focused on the relatively egalitarian division of labour within adivasi societies since historical times.⁴ This division of labour is largely structured by the contingencies of household subsistence. Since adivasi women take up a pivotal role in fulfilment of these needs, they are seen as having greater freedom especially with respect to their sexual relations and their choice of partners.

However, a closer assessment of the customary laws governing community institutions reveals a different picture and shows that adivasi societies, in most cases, follow the same traditional division of labour that structures the position of women. There are both patrilineal and matrilineal adivasi social groups in India whose relations of production differ slightly because of their property structure. Though there is diversity within cultural systems, certain common principles exist within patrilineal adivasi societies across regions, such as the Gonds of central India (Hajra, 1993) and the Mizos of Northeast India (Gangte, 2008).

In almost all cases, women are considered the 'property of men' and have virtually no inheritance rights. This factor structures the access of women to both land and natural resources. Surveys of women in central and northeast India have revealed that patrilineal societies have been subject to a traditional division of labour, where women have assumed

most of the burden of unpaid family labour, on and off the field. Although the work patterns of women have been diverse in different local and communitarian settings, some commonalities exist with respect to the forms of their labour (Nongbri, 1998; Prasad, 2005). The first characteristic is that most of the unpaid subsistence work is carried out by women. However, in most cases the unpaid labour has itself been integrated into the labour market, because of the commercialization of subsistence itself. Since most of the adivasis own marginal landholdings, it has been largely the women who have worked in agriculture, while men usually have gone out for higher paid labour, travelling to cities and also to other states as both agricultural labourers and non-agrarian labourers. This has structured the division of labour.

However, women have also not been confined to family or household labour. They work in the farms of the neighbourhood and undertake short-term daily migration to farms of richer farmers. Thus, we see that the Baiga women of Madhya Pradesh, central India, work on the fields of adivasi Gond peasants, who own large holdings on the fringes of the forests. Similarly, the women of Dumka in Jharkhand cross the river to Bengal to work on higher productivity farms. The local mobility of labour has thus been gendered and often embedded in hegemonic communitarian structures. Hence, it is not surprising that in the case of many forest-dwelling adivasi communities practicing swidden cultivation, women are not allowed to touch either the plough or the axe. By the same measure, the men consider employment in local agriculture, especially as farm servants on the fields of large and middle peasants in the same vicinity, as a lowly job only to be performed by women. Their long-distance migration has been largely in green revolution states and has fetched a much higher wage than local agricultural labour.

In terms of forest produce, while women and children undertake the collection of almost all produce, the use of this produce is mainly confined to household and family needs. In contrast, it is the men who largely control the sale of commercially valuable produce and negotiated its price with local traders in the weekly market. In this sense, custom and customary institutions create a divide between the subsistence and commercial economies, even though such a divide may not have existed in actuality because of the integration of the adivasi household into the labour and commodity markets (Prasad, 1998, 2011, Chapter 4). Adivasi women also have an interface with markets, as they sell fuelwood and forest produce in order to buy household essentials. Hence, the household subsistence has also been integrated into the local market system and commercialized in a way that has made the boundaries

between subsistence and commercial economies blurred. In this sense, adivasi women have been almost always integrated into the seasonal agricultural labour and forest produce commodity markets, albeit at a lower scale than men. However, their degree of proletarianization has remained partial, as they are also dependent on cultivation for their livelihood needs.

While it is expected that the patrilineal system will be discriminatory towards women, the matrilineal society has been considered to be a more egalitarian one. Here, the lineage is traced through the female line, and traditionally the inheritance is also to be determined through this lineage. The best cases of matrilineal tribes are the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia of Meghalaya, who live in the different district autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule (Marak, 2000; Phei, 1974). The village courts formed under these acts are almost always dominated by village councils and chiefs who are the male elders of the community and decide the local cases with respect to inheritance, marriages, divorce and other matters concerning the daily life of these tribes. However, the pattern of matrilineal ownership gives far more autonomy and decision-making power to the male agnates and husbands of the family, much more than any woman enjoys. Although the mother is considered the head of the family, and the youngest daughter is the inheritor of the family property, this property is only held under certain conditions. For example, if a Garo heiress (or the *nokna*, the female head of the family) deserts her husband she loses the right to her property. In the event, the property will be temporarily held by the husband, and if the husband takes a second wife, then this property will become a part of her ancestral property. Furthermore, the *nokna* must marry from her paternal lineage in order to be declared an heiress. If she chooses to have a separate house, she loses her right. Thus, the burden of maintaining the purity of the 'clan' lies with the woman, thus affecting her social mobility and personal choice. The same burden does not lie with a man in the patrilineal system.

It should also be noted that the male head (or the husband of the matriarch) in the matrilineal system has an important influencing role and is in a stronger position than the female head (wife of the patriarch) within the patriarchal community. In other words, the position of men in a matrilineal system is far stronger than the position of women in a patrilineal system. The father and husband are considered the guardians of the children and managers of the property of the wife or the heiress. When a daughter refuses to support her widower father, he receives a share of the property. Furthermore, the maternal uncle, husbands and sons play a key role in the management of the property and often have de

facto control. This, in turn, structures the division of labour within matrilineal societies as well. While the mobility of male members is common, it is the women who stay at home even under matriliney. In this situation, the burden of subsistence falls on the women in matriliney as well (Nongbri, 2000). The discussion above shows that communitarian structures are part of a larger structure of patriarchal oppression. Their rules and authority mediate the relationship between adivasi women and the market. However, the intensification of processes of dispossession since the 1990s weakened these structures and significantly reduced their influence on structuring the division of labour.

Structural Inequalities, Women and Property Rights since the 1990s

The impacts of neo-liberal policies and communitarian customs on the status of adivasi women are reflected in women's control over and access to land. Information on gender-disaggregated statistics on access to land is both problematic and difficult to obtain. The only source appears to be the Agricultural Census of India, which is conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation. These data provide no information on landless households, but provide information on operational holdings (or people actually cultivating the land). These data may indicate how much control women exercise over lands in cultivating households. This limited information can be used to make a gendered analysis of the structural inequalities within the agrarian economy.

The latest Agricultural Census (2011–2012) with respect to the operational holding of adivasi women is shown in Table 3. It is clear that close to 89 per cent of the women have no control over their lands, even though their households may have some access to the land.

Furthermore, this has been the trend over the last decade, as shown in Table 4. Taken together with the data above, this shows that even though there has been a marginal decadal increase in women's land control in all categories, the net result is that an average of only 11 per cent of the women control any land.

If these data are correct, they raise crucial questions about the gendered character of landlessness and its impact on the proletarianization and semi-proletarianization of women. If landlessness is defined as the lack of access to land or property rights, then most adivasi women are landless by the virtue of their gender. Given this fact, the role of adivasi women in agriculture can be that of an unpaid agricultural worker, if the

Table 3. Percentage of Operational Holdings Operated by Adivasi Women

States/ UTs	0.1–1 ha	1–2 ha	2–4-ha	4–10 ha	Above 10 ha	All Size Groups
Arunachal Pradesh	21.05	10.53	8.82	7.14	16.67	10.28
Assam	3.08	4.08	4.76	Neg	Neg	3.65
Chhattisgarh	14.47	11.82	10.09	8.65	6.25	12.40
Gujarat	14.85	15.83	15.60	16.00	20.00	15.28
Jharkhand	10.03	8.72	5.51	4.48	Neg	3.16
Madhya Pradesh	11.35	8.98	8.57	8.44	11.76	9.88
Maharashtra	18.04	16.44	8.94	12.86	14.29	16.20
Manipur	3.45	4.55	8.33	Neg	0.00	4.69
Meghalaya	35.29	32.76	37.50	37.50	Neg	34.45
Mizoram	12.00	10.00	10.00	Neg	Neg	10.87
Nagaland	16.67	15.00	10.42	8.97	12.00	10.11
Odisha	4.95	4.17	4.24	4.76	Neg	4.63
Rajasthan	6.91	5.68	4.71	3.80	Neg	5.98
Tripura	9.92	7.41	7.14	0.00	0.00	9.20
All India	11.93	11.30	10.41	8.82	7.21	11.32

Source: Agricultural Census of India (2011–2012).

Table 4. Percentage Decadal Change in Operational Holdings Operated by Adivasi Women, 2000–2012

	0.1–1 ha	1–2 ha	2–4 ha	4–10 ha	Above 10 ha	All Sizes
Arunachal	–0.38	–4.47	0.49	0.48	Neg	–0.30
Assam	0.12	2.21	3.29	Neg	Neg	1.12
Chhattisgarh	2.91	2.41	2.02	1.87	1.25	2.66
Gujarat	3.00	4.32	4.96	5.36	–5.00	3.83
Jharkhand	10.03	8.72	5.51	4.48	Neg	3.16
Madhya Pradesh	2.88	1.96	2.02	1.96	4.07	2.49
Maharashtra	1.43	1.37	–4.95	0.13	–2.38	0.99

(Table 4 continued)

(Table 4 continued)

	0.1–1 ha	1–2 ha	2–4 ha	4–10 ha	Above 10 ha	All Sizes
Manipur	3.45	0.00	8.33	Neg	Neg	3.13
Meghalaya	7.86	11.71	20.36	23.21	Neg	11.23
Mizoram	0.24	2.86	2.31	Neg	Neg	1.66
Nagaland	-3.33	-7.22	-0.30	3.09	6.12	2.42
Odisha	-0.06	0.11	0.14	0.51	Neg	0.16
Rajasthan	4.68	3.43	2.94	1.60	Neg	3.76
Tripura	0.45	0.79	-1.27	Neg	Neg	-0.17
All India	2.16	2.81	2.59	1.96	1.65	2.51

Source: Calculated from different years of Agricultural Census in India (2011–2012).

nature of family labour is disaggregated. In this context, it is possible to surmise that the increased adverse integration of adivasis into the labour market also signifies the conversion of unpaid work into wage labour. However, this may not be a welcome step because it shows that women are disempowered both as unpaid family labour and also as wage labour in the labour market.

Adivasi Women and Labour Markets under Neo-liberalism

The patterns of integration of adivasi women into the labour market have to be considered in the above context. The data presented below show that the macro-level tendencies in the transformation of adivasi work patterns are gendered in character and conditioned by the rising differentiation within the adivasi societies. Although adivasi women have always shouldered, equally or disproportionately, the burden of meeting household subsistence and other needs, the pattern of their work seems to have changed in the period of the neo-liberal reforms. The graphs below illustrate the relationship between work participation rate⁵ and labour force participation⁶ of adivasi men and women in comparative perspective. The work participation rate refers to those who perform at least 30 days of work in the 365 days before the reference period for which the survey has been done. The long-term trends in the work participation rate of adivasi men and women are shown in Figures 1–4.

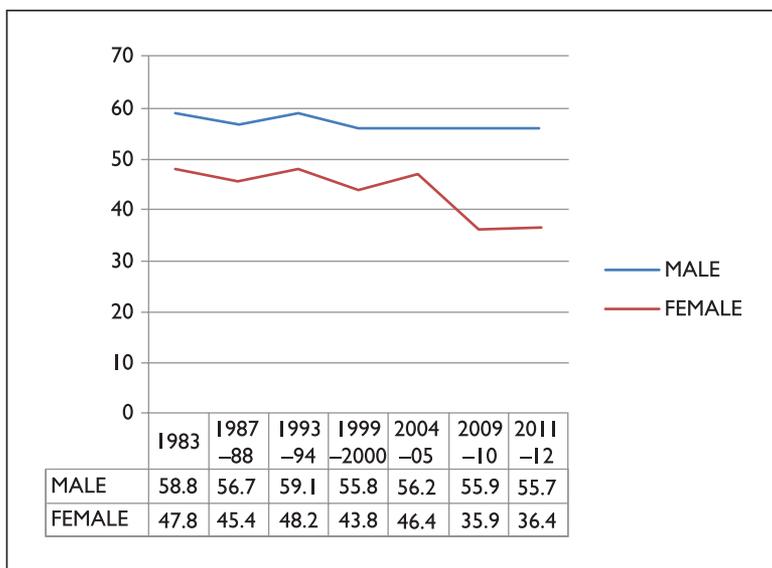


Figure 1. Rural Work Participation Rate by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

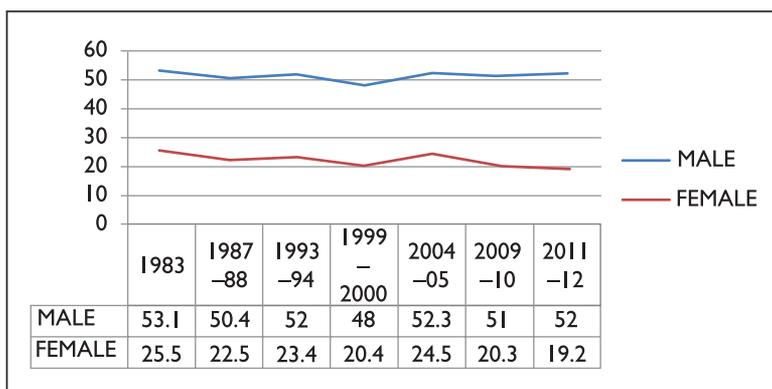


Figure 2. Urban Work Participation Rate by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

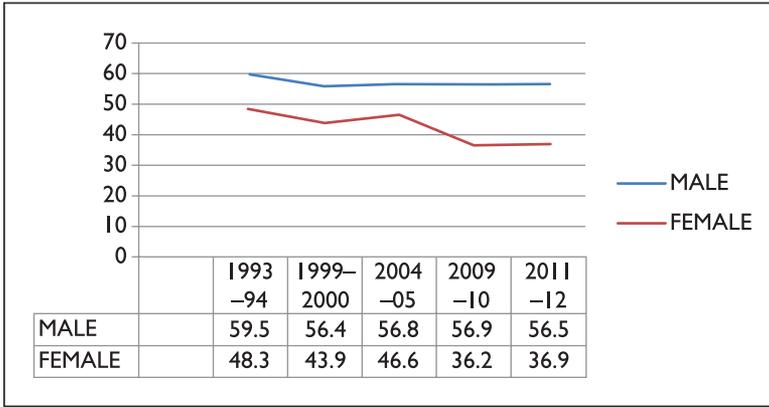


Figure 3. Rural Labour Force Participation Rate by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

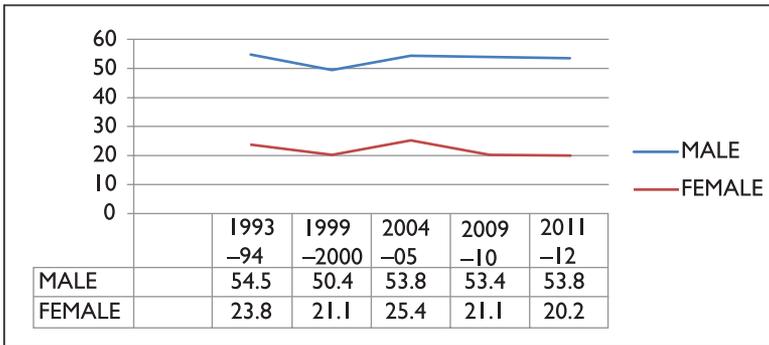


Figure 4. Urban Labour Force Participation Rate by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

The data shows that there has been a steady decline in the male and female work participation rates in almost all years except 2004–2005, which were considered years of distress. It is obvious that poor working families looked for low-paid work, and women who ordinarily did unpaid work in homes and family farms were forced into the labour market. It also shows that the number of adivasis getting work for at least 30 days a year had declined. However, this does not mean that adivasis

were not in the labour market. It is interesting to note that the labour force participation rate (LFPR) (or the number of people in the labour market, both employed and unemployed) remained stagnant in the case of both men and women, even though the work participation declined, especially after the neo-liberal reforms. As shown, there is a sharp decline in rural and urban female LFPRs after 2004–2005. But in urban areas, the LFPR of men remains almost stagnant. Further investigation is needed to show whether men are willing to work at lower wages and, thereby, pushing adivasi women out of the labour market. But available evidence shows that wages for both adivasi men and women are low when compared to non-*adivasi* populations. Hence, it is possible to surmise that adivasi men are willing to work at a lower rate than their other counterparts in the rural areas.

There is virtually no ready data on the gender wage gap within *adivasis*. But discrimination between *adivasis* and others in agricultural wages is shown by a recent study. The study states that in 1999–2000, the daily wage earned by an *adivasi* male worker in an agricultural occupation was just ₹33, and that in 2009–2010, it increased to ₹73. Compared with all social groups at constant (2009–2010) prices, the authors surmise that in 1999–2000, the average wage of an *adivasi* male worker in an agricultural occupation was less by ₹13 than the corresponding average wage for workers from all social groups; in 2009–2010, this gap increased to ₹14. In non-agricultural occupations, the average wage gap between male *adivasi* workers and workers from other social groups increased from ₹11 to ₹18 between 1999–2000 and 2009–2010 (Karat & Rawal, 2014). This indicates that both *adivasi* men and women were concentrated in extremely low-wage labour and therefore, it is not surprising that men may have been replacing women in circumstances of declining non-agricultural wage labour options.

But it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that women are no longer entering the labour market. Figure 5 shows that an increasing number of women who entered the labour market were unable to find work. It is also evident, when comparing Figures 5 and 6, that the unemployment rate of *adivasi* women may have surpassed that of *adivasi* men in the urban areas. In rural areas, too, women's unemployment is almost reaching the level of *adivasi* male unemployment.

This trend indicated by the data of the National Sample Survey can be analyzed in further detail if a national- and state-level analysis is done for the decadal changes between the census years 2001 and 2011. Table 5 clearly shows a decline in main workers, or those workers who are getting at least 180 days of work. While rural work participation rate

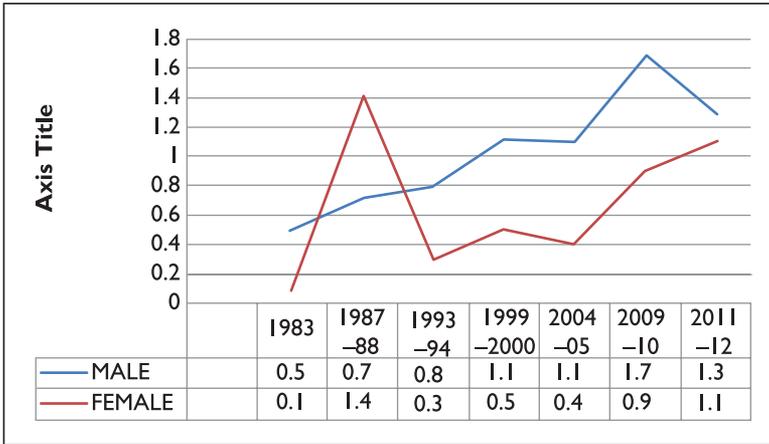


Figure 5. Rural Unemployment Rates by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

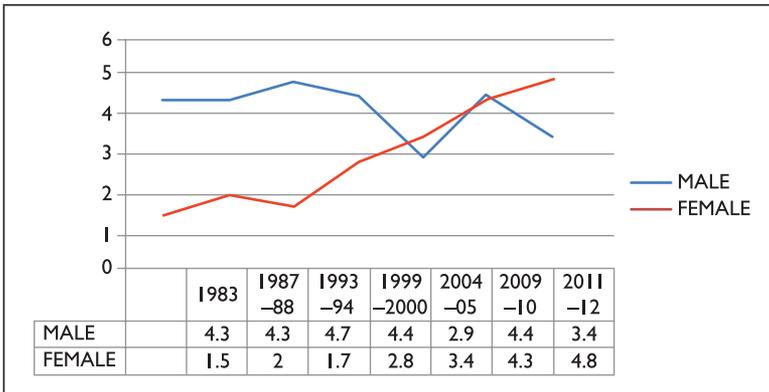


Figure 6. Urban Unemployment Rates by Gender

Source: Calculated from different rounds of NSS data.

declined for women, it has gone up marginally for men. At the same time, the work for adivasi men has declined in both urban and rural areas, but for adivasi women there appears to be a slight increase in urban work participation rates. This indicates that agrarian distress has broken the shackles of the community and that more and more adivasi women are seeking wage work in the labour market. It is interesting to note that the

Table 5. Decadal Changes in Work Participation Rates and Main Workers, 2001–2011

	Work Participation Rate			Main Workers		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Total	-0.39	0.68	-1.31	-4.16	-7.33	-0.69
Rural	-0.40	0.53	-1.28	-4.72	-8.02	-1.17
Urban	2.58	3.04	2.66	-1.04	-1.97	1.83

Sources: Calculated from Census of India (2001, 2011), Schedule Tribe Tables.

number of marginal women workers seeking work in the labour market has increased by about 8.18 per cent in the rural areas in the last decade. Significantly, this figure has come down by about 5.16 per cent for adivasi men.⁷ Seen together with the slight increase in rural work participation rates of adivasi men, it may be concluded that adivasi men were finding more jobs in the agricultural sector than women. At the same time, the sharp rise in women seeking work in both urban and rural areas may be linked to this factor. It is also intimately related with the ongoing agrarian distress and the jobless growth that has been a result of the neo-liberal policies.

While the shift away from rural labour and agricultural work is indicated from decadal changes calculated from the census data between 2001 and 2011, the character of this change may be elaborated further. Table 6 shows the decadal change in the number of adivasi men and women dependent on agriculture and non-agricultural activities for their subsistence. Adivasi men and women have started depending more and more on non-agrarian work for their labour. It is also significant that the rise in urban non-agrarian work is driven by the sharp rise in female non-agricultural main and marginal workers. In the rural areas, too, non-agricultural employment amongst workers registered an increase in the last decade. This shows that agrarian distress has impacted the work patterns of women and that the changing relationship between agrarian and non-agrarian work forms the structural context of adivasi women's integration into the labour market. It also explains the sharp rise in adivasi women seeking work in the labour market and reflects the fact that the proletarianization of the adivasis is driven by the proletarianization of women at a greater degree than that of men. This is largely because the women were greatly responsible for farming activities, while adivasi men traditionally migrated for labour.

The changing relationship between agrarian and non-agrarian labour is also exemplified in the recent farmer's survey of the National Sample

Table 6. Decadal Change in Classification of Workers by Industry, 2001–2011

	Main Agricultural Workers			Main Non-agricultural Workers			Marginal Agricultural Workers			Marginal Non-agricultural Workers		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Total	-2.51	-2.46	-2.84	2.51	2.46	2.84	-3.90	-3.74	-3.26	3.90	3.74	3.26
Rural	-0.83	-0.72	-1.19	3.64	0.72	1.19	-3.48	-3.70	-2.83	3.48	3.70	2.83
Urban	0.73	1.20	-1.30	-0.73	-1.20	1.30	-4.17	-1.65	-5.88	4.17	1.65	5.88

Sources: Calculated from Census of India (2001, 2011), Schedule Tribe Tables.

Survey. The survey clearly shows that the LFPR of women in agriculture underwent a seasonal decline by 2.83 per cent (reflected in figures on marginal agricultural work), even between the months of July–December 2012 and January–June 2013, in its principal status (i.e., those getting more than 180 days of work in agriculture). It is also significant that if all work, principal and secondary status, is taken together, the seasonal decline in dependence on farming was 4.15 per cent for adivasi women and only approximately 1.61 per cent for adivasi men.⁸ This again begs the question of whether women were being pushed out of labour market because men were getting employed in low-wage agricultural employment in an economy with jobless growth.

At a regional level, however, there are patterns that indicate multiple trajectories and diverse trends between 2001 and 2011.⁹ The first trend that comes to the fore is the shift from ‘main’ to ‘marginal’ work amongst adivasi women workers and growing proletarianization of women within the rural economy. For example, in states like Rajasthan, the decadal decline amongst main adivasi women workers has been by 5.31 per cent. But it is important to note that the rise in marginal work has largely been in the rural sector, with 12.19 per cent rise in agricultural labour, which is about 1 per cent higher than the overall national increase of 11.37 per cent. Yet, despite this significant trend, it is also important to note that most adivasi women still depend on low-wage agricultural labour for their livelihoods. In Rajasthan alone, employment has declined by 2.66 per cent, but this is lower than the average of 2.84 per cent for adivasi women. In fact, there is an increase in the main rural adivasi women workforce in a state like Madhya Pradesh by 1.29 per cent, but this is accompanied by an increasing rate of landlessness amongst adivasi families (11.9 per cent, as per Table 1), thus indicating a growing proletarianization of adivasi women within the rural economy itself.

The second state-level trend shows that the overall trend in non-agrarian work of women workers in rural and urban areas is increasing in both the main and marginal categories. This is evident in some eastern and central Indian states, such as Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh. In these three states, the decline in employment for adivasi main workers is at a much higher rate than for adivasi women, in both rural and urban areas between 2001 and 2011. In Jharkhand, main rural work for adivasi men declined by almost 20 per cent, while for women it only declined by 6.63 per cent, whereas in both Odisha and Chhattisgarh it declined by approximately 11–12 per cent for men and by only about 4.5 per cent for women. This was accompanied by only marginal changes in the main adivasi women workforce in the urban areas.

However, what stands out is the increasing marginality of work in both urban and rural areas in these three states, specifically an increase in marginal work from 4.5 to 6 per cent for adivasi women and from 10 to 20 per cent for adivasi men. This difference is a result of the greater dispossession of lands through growing landlessness and marginalization of landholdings. This is reflected in the rate of increase in the number of women agricultural workers in these states (from 7 to 14 per cent), which is double the rate of increase of adivasi men agricultural workers (from 4 to 9 per cent). But the average in all these states, except for Chhattisgarh, is lower than the all-India average of 11.37 per cent for adivasi women agricultural labourers and 7.31 per cent for adivasi men agricultural labourers. This can be contrasted with the rates of increase in non-agricultural work, ranging from 4.6 to 9 per cent, which are much higher than the all-India average of 3.4 per cent. What is even more telling is the increase in non-agrarian work, which is largely in rural areas and much higher than the all-India average of 2.74 per cent for rural adivasi men. But since most of this work is seasonal in character, it is possible to surmise that men are getting much less regular work than women in these three states. Is it possible then to conclude that the burden on adivasi women to ensure survival of households is increasing? Although the data indicate this, further investigation is needed to confirm the same.

A third trend is seen in most of the Northeast Indian states, where there is a rise in non-agricultural urban work by more than 15 per cent in each state. This rise is indicative of the higher than average growth rates of urban adivasi populations in these states. But one of the main features of this increase is that though adivasi women seem to be taking to non-agrarian work, the rate of increase of such work is much higher for men than for women, sometimes even exceeding 25 per cent. In contrast, the rate of decadal increase of women's non-agrarian work remains within single digits. At the same time, the number of adivasi women workers depending on agricultural labour has increased in all states, except Tripura and Manipur. The pattern of landlessness in Tripura and Manipur shows contrasting trends. While there is a considerable increase in landlessness in Manipur (approximately 14.2 per cent, as per Table 1), in Tripura there is a decrease in landlessness by 1.6 per cent. Hence, in Manipur, the increase in women farmers may actually highlight contract farming, another mode of semi-proletarianization. However, even in these states, there is a considerable increase in non-agrarian work amongst women. These emerging trends in the northeastern states are in stark contrast with the central and eastern states, as the burden of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization seems to be borne by both adivasi

men and women. The differences in these patterns largely emerge from the landholding patterns and the nature of control that women enjoy over cultivable land (as shown in Tables 3 and 4).

The discussion above shows the multiple ways in which the labour markets have penetrated adivasi societies and highlights the multiple regional patterns influencing the fundamental transformation of the work of adivasi women that is taking place. The changing forms of labour being undertaken by these women show a broad secular trend of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization of adivasi women. At the same time, the growing patterns of resistance to the increasing dispossession in adivasi-dominated regions also strengthened patriarchal communitarian identities, which often disregarded the gendered nature of dispossession (Prasad, 2016).

Community Structures and Labour Markets

It is pertinent to ask whether communitarian structures have been able to withstand and resist the process of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization. This question is particularly significant because reformation of community structures has been considered a panacea for bringing about gender equality in adivasi societies (Agarwal, 2010; Kelkar & Nathan, 2003; Krishna, 2009). This argument assumes that the community will counter the negative impact of the market, if democratized, and form the basis for an egalitarian social order. However, an analysis of the labour market participation of individual matrilineal and patrilineal adivasi communities shows that customary laws and communitarian authority may not have much influence on the current forms of labour practices by adivasi women. This analysis takes into account some of the major patrilineal adivasi communities, such as Bhil, Gond, Santhal and Khondand, and also two of the main matrilineal communities, namely, Garo and Khasis (which also include Jaintia) from Meghalaya.¹⁰ A comparison of the decadal changes between 2001 and 2011 is shown in Table 7.

The percentage of main workers has declined in all cases except the matrilineal adivasi communities, such as the Khasis and Garos. Table 7 shows a substantial increase in main work for Garo women in the urban areas, and for Khasi women in both rural and urban areas. Thus, while there is a secular decline amongst the patrilineal communities, it is the matrilineal communities in which the decline in main work is the slowest. Although this maybe largely because of regional differences, one interesting fact is that the decline of main work amongst all women

Table 7. Decadal Changes in Work Participation Rate by Community (percentage), 2001–2011

TRU	Total Workers			Main Workers		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Patrilineal Adivasi Communities						
Chhattisgarh						
Bhil etc.	5.08	5.07	3.40	-9.20	-5.17	-20.61
Bhil etc.	4.59	6.40	2.32	-16.95	-11.41	-27.09
Bhil etc.	7.03	4.19	6.52	-1.97	-0.13	-12.50
Gond etc.	-1.08	0.01	-2.12	-6.95	-9.89	-4.21
Gond etc.	-0.97	-0.01	-1.88	-7.55	-10.58	-4.72
Gond etc.	3.75	3.08	5.15	-2.57	-2.37	-0.49
Jharkhand						
Santhal	1.07	0.12	2.20	-15.73	-21.46	-6.79
Santhal	1.02	-0.04	2.23	-16.35	-22.41	-7.15
Santhal	5.21	4.99	6.28	-4.71	-3.81	-2.41
Odisha						
Khond etc.	-0.13	-1.17	1.01	-11.46	-14.81	-6.11
Khond etc.	0.04	-1.02	1.19	-11.74	-15.08	-6.43
Khond etc.	-0.41	-3.29	3.26	-6.07	-8.53	3.73

TRU	Total Workers			Main Workers		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Matrilineal Adivasi Communities						
Meghalaya						
Garro	-4.03	-3.26	-4.78	-2.04	-3.16	-1.19
Garro	-4.31	-3.62	-4.99	-2.67	-3.54	-2.11
Garro	-1.51	-0.29	-2.27	4.51	0.15	12.03
Khasi etc.	-1.63	-0.57	-2.59	1.27	-1.14	4.10
Khasi etc.	-2.84	-1.57	-4.03	0.72	-1.62	3.31
Khasi etc.	4.08	4.40	3.91	1.68	-0.16	4.22

Sources: Calculated from Census of India (2001, 2011), Schedule Tribe Tables.

workers is evident in Meghalaya (the main home of Khasi and Garo), but the trend is not replicated at a micro level for the Khasis.

Is it then possible to argue that matrilineal communitarian structures help to preserve employment opportunities? A closer look at the data does not give us a clear answer to this question, as the trend amongst the Garos is different. Here, the main work for urban Garo women has substantially increased, whereas for rural Garo women it has decreased. The process of intrusion of the market into Garo society has been documented (Fernandes, Pereira & Khatso, 2008), and this has also impacted the character of operational landholdings. While inheritance is decided through the matrilineal line, the control and management of the land is actually done by men. This traditional system has undergone a change with the intrusion of private property. Garo families have begun to give individual ownership of lands to their sons. In this sense, although the inheritance line remains female, the system is more or less patriarchal in character (Marak, 2000).

Within this broad context, it is also clear that fairly major occupational changes have taken place between both patriarchal and matrilineal adivasi groups. The first trend to be noticed concerns most patriarchal adivasi social groups, for which the degree of proletarianization amongst women is much greater, as is seen in the enormous increases in the percentage of adivasi women agricultural labourers. In the period 2001–2011, agricultural labour amongst the Bhil and Gond women of Chhattisgarh has increased by about 22 and 12.86 per cent, respectively. It should be noted that these decadal changes are much higher than the overall average of the state and, therefore, reflect greater rural proletarianization of adivasi women in these communities. A similar trend is seen for the Santhal of Jharkhand and the Khond of Odisha, amongst whom agriculture labour has increased between 7 and 8 per cent in 2001–2011. Furthermore, in the same period there has also been an increase of some non-agricultural labour amongst adivasi women in patriarchal communities. For the Bhils of Chhattisgarh and the Khonds of Odisha, this increase varies from 11 to 11.67 per cent, whereas for the Gonds of Chhattisgarh and the Santhals of Jharkhand it hovers between 4 and 5 per cent. Nonetheless, all these trends indicate a proletarianization of adivasi women in the central and east Indian belt. They also show that the patriarchal community has not been able to resist the neo-liberal labour market.

A similar conclusion may also be reached for the matrilineal communities of the Northeast. There has been a loss of work in farming and agricultural labour for Garo and Khasi adivasi women. Agriculture labour amongst the women of these two communities declined in the

range of 0.23–0.53 per cent between 2001 and 2011, but rose in the case of non-agricultural work between 6 and 8.5 per cent in the same period. These trends show that the character of proletarianization may have regional differences, but community-based differences only exist in terms of the degree and the geographical location of a particular adivasi community. Hence, it is safe to argue that the impact of social structures is neutralized by the larger integration of adivasi regions into the labour market.

Conclusion

This article elaborates the different dimensions of the gendered nature of semi-proletarianization and proletarianization of the adivasi social groups after the period of neo-liberal reforms. It has shown that the integration of the adivasis in general, and adivasi women in particular, has been a result of agrarian distress and macro-economic trends that have structured the patterns of dispossession, displacement and urbanization in the last two decades. In doing so, the essay has contested the proposition that communitarian structures play an important part in the division of labour within adivasi communities. A closer micro-level analysis of particular social groups also confirms the gendered character of the consolidation of working class formation in adivasi societies due to the penetration of the labour markets. However, the processes of proletarianization and semi-proletarianization of women have multiple trajectories that are structured by the character of landlessness and dispossession.

The second proposition contested by this essay is that there is an autonomous sphere of existence of the subsistence economy of the adivasis. Within this perspective, it is also assumed that the role of the adivasi women is largely confined to unpaid labour within the sphere of subsistence. However, as the analysis in this article has shown, the blurred boundaries between subsistence and commercial activities have ensured that there is hardly autonomous space for the adivasi households to carry out their activities. This has implications for the life of adivasi women in several ways. The semi-agrarian character of their labour ensures that, although they are liberated from communitarian structures, they face adverse inclusion into labour markets, as shown by both the macro- and micro-level analyses in this article. In this sense, the proletarianization of adivasi women and the forms of their labour are firmly shaped and affected by the circuits of capital.

Lastly, this essay counters the oft-repeated proposition that communities and communitarian structures can stand in opposition to the labour market and protect the interests of the adivasi women if they are democratized. The analysis of this essay has shown that both matrilineal and patrilineal communities have experienced similar degrees of semi-proletarianization and proletarianization among adivasi women. However, the nature of such a process is influenced by regional trends and land-holding patterns. Thus the thesis that communitarian production and distribution systems guide the class formation process does not, in fact, hold in the case of most adivasi regions. Rather, the labour market is guided by macro-economic processes that often neutralize the influence of these structures. Hence, a more rigorous class analysis of adivasi societies is needed if the intensity and the gendered character of adverse inclusion of adivasi households into labour markets are to be considered under contemporary neo-liberalism. Given this conclusion, further studies need to explain why the growth of a neo-traditional patriarchal communitarian identity coexists with the phenomenon of proletarianization of adivasi women and how it has affected patriarchal authority.

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Notes

1. The Constitution of India defines 'Scheduled Tribes' under Article 342 as people with 'indications of primitive traits; a distinctive culture; shyness in contact with community at large; geographically isolated and backward'. This definition has been critiqued by activists and scholars and the term 'adivasi' is instead used as a form of self-expression and a positive political identity.
2. Both these terms are much debated in the literature, but this debate is beyond the scope of this article. The term 'proletarianization' here refers to processes of dispossession and accumulation which force people to forgo their control over all means of production and enter the labour market as wage labourers in either urban or rural areas. The term semi-proletarianization refers to processes of accumulation and displacement of livelihoods that force small-scale producers to depend on wage labour or disguised wage labour for a large part of their livelihoods, even though they may control some means of production, such as land.
3. This trend and argument has been mainly present in the work of anthropologists and the advocates of the perspective that communitarian management

- is the best alternative to neo-liberalism. Agarwal (2010), for example, argues that a mere reformation in communitarian rules and structures can bring about substantial changes in gender equations and women's empowerment.
4. Colonial and post-colonial anthropological perspectives and monographs provide enough evidence of this. For example, see Elwin (1939) and Singh (1988). For a survey of literature and debates on gender issues in adivasi societies, see Xaxa (2004). For a critique of anthropological perspectives, see Prasad (2011).
 5. 'Work participation rate' is defined as the percentage of total workers in the total population. 'Workers' are defined as persons who are engaged in any economic activity or who, despite their attachment to economic activity, abstained themselves from work for reasons of illness, injury or other physical disability, bad weather, festivals, social or religious functions or other contingencies necessitating temporary absence from work. Unpaid helpers who assist in the operation of an economic activity in the household farm or non-farm activities are also considered as workers.
 6. 'Labour force participation' refers to the population which supplies or offers to supply labour for pursuing economic activities for the production of goods and services and, therefore, includes both 'employed' and 'unemployed' persons/person-days. 'Labour force participation rate' (LFPR) is defined as the proportion of persons/person-days in the labour force to the total persons/person-days. These ratios are given in per 1,000 of persons/person-days.
 7. Calculated from Census of India (2001, 2011, Table B-1).
 8. Calculated by Thiagu Rangarajan from unit-level data from NSSO (2015).
 9. All state-level trends are calculated from Census of India, Primary Census Abstracts, Schedule Tribes (2001, 2011).
 10. All data analysis in this section uses the individual tribe data of Census of India (2001, 2011).

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