

Translating Rigoberta Menchú's 'Indígena' into Hindi: *Mulnivasi, Adivasi, Vanvasi, Janjati or Indígena?*

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ABSTRACT

India is home to roughly twenty percent of the world's total indigenous population. However, as a nation, she does not officially recognize any group or community as indigenous. Different names are used to refer to the indigenous people of India. As these names often have implied meanings, there is a problem of consensus on how to call the indigenous people of India collectively. They often live in a tribal setup and are considered the most marginalized section of Indian society. Scheduled Tribes, the official name given to the tribal communities of India, hardly find a place in popular uses. The aim of the present work is to look into the translation of the term *Indígena*, widely used in the Americas, in Hindi. The objective of the work is to analyze different terms prevalent and in use to call the indigenous people of India and see whether or not they have semantic equivalence with the term *Indígena*.

Key Words : Hindi, *Mulnivasi, Adivasi, Vanvasi, Janjati, Indígena*

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, especially in the old colonial spaces, the ethnicity, culture, and identity of a large part of the oppressed indigenous communities give rise to sensitive socio-cultural issues.

However, the criteria for demarcating a person as indigenous are not concrete. Numerous variables play an essential role in designating the indigenous status of any people. Antiquity, language, custom, and culture are some variables that can be key in the designation of a people as indigenous. However, even these variables are not sufficient to establish the claim of indigeneity with certainty. For this reason, the UN has left the matter to the will of each people, the will of self-definition.

There is no definition yet that can be considered complete in the context of indigenous people. Through many studies already carried out, one realizes that several factors play a notable role in determining a people as indigenous, without being universal. In other words, the

characteristics of indigenous people are not necessarily similar in comparison to any other indigenous people. Therefore, there is a lack of common denominators that can serve to classify all indigenous peoples scattered throughout the world. When determinants with universal applicability are lacking, the UN also uses Martínez Cobo's indigeneity criteria as standard without making it official.

The UN declared 1993 as the International Year of the Indigenous and granted 22 rights to indigenous peoples. Some of these rights were self-governance and self-determination, protection against genocide, and possession and control of traditional territories and lands. It is worth mentioning that there was much controversy only a year earlier (1992) due to the commemoration of the fifth centenary of the "Encuentro." Celebration was a mockery of the historical misery for many indigenous people. Nevertheless, despite the protest, the fifth centenary of the "Encuentro" was celebrated.

Most indigenous people believe that these 500 years

were not years of meeting of the world but years of incessant abuse. However, in the same year, Rigoberta Menchú, a former Quiche militant, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for inter-ethnic and cultural reconciliation. This recognition by the UN in the people's struggle for justice marked the paradigm shift. Since then, the world began to take the issue of the indigenous people problem much more seriously.

The celebration of the fifth centenary of the meeting amid protests, followed by the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Menchú and the UN declaration of 1993 as the international year of indigenous people, were very important events to bring to light the problems the indigenous referent, which until then had not acquired worldwide attention. Followed by these developments, 1995–2004 and 2004–2014 were proclaimed as international decades of the world's indigenous population.

As one of the global projects to extend human rights to all the world's peoples, Indigenous peoples' rights have recently gained attention.

However, this newly acquired attention in international forums should not be considered a recent effort. The history of the indigenous struggle (to enjoy their rights outside their sphere in international forums) dates back to 1926, when Cayuga, an American Indian, traveled to Geneva to speak for his people before the League of Nations, hoping to be heard. He waited a year in Europe without having a chance to appear before the League of Nations and had to return. Likewise, WT Ratana, a Maori leader, traveled to England and asked King George V to protest against the breakdown of the 1840 treaty that guaranteed the Maori the right to land. He was also denied.

In 1957, the issue of the deplorable condition of indigenous people at work was addressed by the ILO (International Labour Organization). However, it was criticized by indigenous people on the pretext that it did not include the actual perspective of indigenous people but was assimilationist.

In 1972, the UN launched the Martínez Cobo study that aimed to examine the problems of discrimination against indigenous peoples. In 1982, the UN founded the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. A year later, this group gave indigenous representatives access to the UN for the first time. In 1985, the United Nations Fund for Voluntary Contributions to Indigenous Populations was established. The year 1989 was marked by the adoption of ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and tribal

peoples in independent countries. The Indigenous movements have steadily gained the world's attention over the last fifty years. Today, the term indigenous is widely used in the UN official documents and many other countries with a substantial indigenous population.

It is relevant to consider how the term indigenous, which can be directly translated into Spanish as *Indígena*, is treated in international discourse to understand the process of the transcendence of these ideas at the level of literary expression.

The term indigenous, though widely used, is far from a universal term to denote the tribal population. Even some indigenous groups refrain from calling themselves indigenous. As Peters and Mika note, "There has been opposition by various tribal groups and 'first nations' peoples to the terms 'Indigenous'..." (p.1229). The word *indígena* comes from the Latin word *Indígena*, which means native. The word *Indígena* came into use in 1603 to name plants and animals naturally found in the New World. As mentioned earlier, many tribal communities express reservations about calling themselves indigenous. They consider the term colonial and denigrating.

It is believed that the term *Indígena* has a racist connotation. Moreover, it is also emphasized that the term indigenous itself is not indigenous as it has been given by the colonizers who have undermined the heterogeneity of indigenous people across the world.

A detailed study done by Peters and Mika on the tribal people's opposition to the term indigenous across the world reveals that it is still not a universally excepted term. However, many tribal communities seem to be okay with the term indigenous. In the case of Mesoamerica, for instance, the term is not only accepted but used as a mark of their identity to advance their collective concerns as tribal populations. Many indigenous activists use the term to underscore the fact that the Spaniards invaded them, and they call themselves indigenous because they are the first people of the land and have primacy over its resources. Indigeneity has become the rallying point for many indigenous activists of Mesoamerica. Though the problems with the term indigenous or *indígena* remain to be solved, it is clear that in Menchú's work, the term *indígenas* is freely internalized and is loaded with cultural, historical, and political poetics.

Yo llamo Rigoberta Menchuy así me nació la conciencia and its Significance:

Rigoberta Menchú's struggle to secure the human

rights Indigenous people of Guatemala has won her the Nobel Peace Prize. Today, she is one of the most prominent Indigenous rights advocates globally. She was born in a poor indigenous family in the Guatemalan highlands. As a child, she suffered and witnessed the suffering of indigenous people in a racist society with huge socioeconomic and cultural inequalities. She is a war survivor. She has first-hand experience of daily oppression of indigenous people in the *fincas* and plantation farms and displacement due to usurpation and persecution by the army. In 1983, she narrated her experience as a survivor and an eyewitness of the atrocities done to the indigenous communities in a series of interviews given to Elizabeth Burgos. The interviews were compiled and arranged to give them a form of a book named, *Yo soy Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. The book helped draw the world's attention to the struggle of the indigenous society. Also, it made the Guatemalan regime answerable for reckless and brutal crimes against the indigenous society. In the context of the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, the term *indígena* has to do with marginalized people, people who have a distinct culture and custom, who practice different beliefs systems, speak languages other than the language of the mainstream, and who have been inhabiting the land before the conquest and claim ownership of the land and the resources.

***Indígena* in the context of India:**

Unlike the rigorous studies done on the origin of the American man, the studies on the indigenous people in India have not generated much interest. It does not mean that there has been no scientific research. Many indigenous people of India have African roots. Studies carried out by genealogists and anthropologists state many genetic differences between the Indian tribes and other Indian communities. However, due to political and social reasons, little to no interest is shown by the governments in documenting the genetic makeup of her diverse population. The Indian government has consistently denied indigenous status to tribal populations. In India, who is indigenous in precise terms, is a million-dollar question. The government has politically categorized some of them as Scheduled Tribes.

Though in its documents, the UN calls the tribal people of India indigenous people. In the annual report of IWIGA, one frequently finds mentions of those communities as indigenous who are legally designated

as tribes.

As Xaxa notes :

... there are three aspects that are central to the conceptualization of the indigenous people. First indigenous are those people who lived in the country to which they belong before colonization or conquest by people from outside the country or the geographical region. Secondly, they have become marginalized due to conquest and colonization by people outside the region. Thirdly, such people govern their lives more in social, economic, and cultural institutions than in the law applicable to society or the country (p.3589).

Before we zero in on the closest translation of Rigoberta's *Indígena* into Hindi, we must do a critical analysis of these three chosen words in the context of India. Tribes in India, as Virginia Xaxa observes, have been studied from two different perspectives in two different periods. The British studied tribes as separate social categories, distinct from the dominant society during the colonial period. During the post-colonial period, the focus shifted from studying them as a separate category to part of the larger group, i.e., mainstream Hindu society. Xaxa proposes that such problems of tribal identity can be solved by merely calling them indigenous. However, he warns of other problems that arise from using the term indigenous. In terms of marginality and autochthony (the criteria mentioned by Xaxa for a tribe to be called indigenous), the tribal people of India do qualify naturally. Xaxa points out that the Indian government showed no reservation on the issue of the term indigenous at the ILO conference in 1959. However, when the term slowly shifted from its original use, i.e., integration to empowerment, the Indian government changed its stance.

Unlike other places (where the history of conquest and migration is demarcated), it is not an easy task in India to confer indigeneity to a few groups and leave out the others. The Indian experience in terms of conquest, migration, and subjugation has been unique and hence incomparable with experiences of other places in the world. A body of opinion holds that the Aryans were the first conquerors of India, and whosoever resided in India before they can be designated indigenous. If indigeneity in the case of India is decided based on the time of migration and the cut-off is considered before the coming of Aryans, many tribal communities will fail to claim an indigenous status, as they have settled in India way after the arrival of the Aryans. Therefore, even if we consider

Aryans the first conquerors to simplify our understanding of human settlement in India, it does not necessarily make all the Indian tribes indigenous.

How can we possibly translate the term *Indígena*?:

It is evident from the discussion above that indigeneity is a far more complex issue in India (owing to several waves of migrations and continual internal migrations) than in any other part of the world. As the Indian context is different from the rest of the world when it comes to the issue of indigeneity, the translation into Hindi of the term *indígena* (used widely in the context of the Americas where the time of the conquest and marginality of the tribal people is much clearer) becomes all the more challenging.

A pertinent question that might be asked is, why have we selected only four out of so many existing terms for the tribal people of India? The only reason this article prefers to analyze these terms over the others is because of their relatively broader use in the context of the tribal population of India.

In the following part, we examine how these four selected terms stand on their own, and also critically analyze these terms concerning the term *Indígena* used in Rigoberta Menchú's testimony.

Mulnivasi:

The term *Mulnivansi* means the original inhabitant and is sparingly used in the southern part of India. The Aryan-Dravidian theory claims that the Dravidian people inhabited the entire India during ancient times, and their presence was up to present-day Iran. When the Aryans from Central Asia invaded India, the Dravidians were pushed southwards, and the country got bifurcated racially into two halves, dominated by the Aryan majority in the north and the Dravidian majority in the south.

Today, some organizations in the south of India claim themselves to be the original inhabitants of the land and exert their rights on land and resources as the first people and prefer to call themselves *Mulnivasi*. Besides, *Mulnivansi* status is also claimed by some groups representing Dalit communities. Dalits are regarded as among the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy. They are often victims of caste-based abuse and violence. Their association with the term *Mulnivansi* is derived from the legend of conflict between the Aryans and the Dasyus in ancient times. They espouse *Mulnivasi* identity based on the postulate that the Aryans were not native to this

land and had invaded India, uprooting the Dalit population. It, however, implies that either the Dalit settlement is even older than the tribes of India, or they are their contemporaries. While many theories explain the emergence of Dalit communities, one theory does point to the tribal origin of the Dalit communities. However, in the present times, neither the Dalit communities nor tribal communities claim any historical association with one another. The tribes, however, distance themselves from the name *Mulnivasi*. They do not seem to associate well with this name. Though *Mulnivasi* can be translated as *Indígena*, in the context of India, the term does not carry those attributes which define *indígena* of Mesoamerica. Dalit communities are generally not out of the mainstream as opposed to tribal communities; instead, they are a discriminated section of the mainstream. Though the term *Mulnivansi* can be translated as indigenous, it is more used to counter the Aryan supremacy in the history of India. It does not share those attributes that the term *Indígena* holds in the context of Mesoamerica.

Another practice gaining traction is using *Mulnivansi* as an umbrella term for all marginalized people of India. For example, Bhavna Meena, in her book *Awaaj-E-mulnivansi*, uses the term *Mulnivansi* not for the Dalits and the tribes but also for women. However, such generalized use of the term has diluted the original essence and has made it lose its precision.

Adivasi:

The term Adivasi was forced upon most tribal people as a marker of social differentiation. As a result, today, the term has not only been internalized, but it is also the most widely used term for denoting the indigenous people of India. Although it is not an official term, it is widely used in by politicians, administrators, and society. *Adivasi* can be translated into Hindi as "the original inhabitant."

The term Adivasi has become a word of choice for the liberal thinkers who wish to broach the issue of the marginalized tribes to mainstream society. They raise the issues of Adivasis within the indigenous framework of human rights. The term *Adivasi* was coined in the 1930s to give a collective social identity to tribal communities of India. Animated by the Marxist readings, the liberals found their marginalized class in the *Adivasis*. They helped start an armed revolt against the oppressive landlords, which was suppressed violently by the then government. However, it served as a spark to instigate a nationwide left-oriented guerrilla resistance against the

establishment. Therefore, they preferred to use *Adivasi* for these oppressed people, voicing their support. If any community has been affected adversely by capitalism the most, it is a tribal community in India. All new megaprojects which open doors for development and progress put the curtain down on the tribal way of life. They are displaced from their ancestral lands without making proper arrangements for their relocation. Factories and plants are built, destroying their surroundings and displacing them. They are chased away from their habitat to have the raw material used in manufacturing modern products. These raw materials are primarily located in the areas of tribal communities. For years, these people have lived and taken care of their surroundings, only taking what is required for subsistence.

The age-old tribal tradition of living with nature is dying, as the tribal communities in many places are being harassed and arrested for using forests and hills they have been using for generations.

All these discriminations and oppression directly connect with capitalism, and for left-wing groups, the tribal communities have become their object of analysis. They aggressively engage with tribal affairs and pose as their voice. These campaigns are carried in their preferred name for the tribal communities: *Adivasis*. To many critics, the term *Adivasi* politically seems a term imbued with liberal ideological elements. Regardless of the socio-cultural meaning the term *Adivasi* might possess, the term elicits a liberal orientation when politically used.

Besides, the Christian missionaries also prefer to use the name *Adivasi* to denote the tribal communities of India. This is because Christianity, as a religion, has considerable acceptance among the tribal communities. Therefore, Christian tribal people are commonly called *Adivasi* Christians, a name to which tribal people rarely have a reservation.

Vanvasi:

The right-wing nationalistic discourses have expressed reservation on using the term *Adivasi* on two accounts: first, due to the semantics of the term *Adivasi* and second, its extensive use in the leftist discourses. By semantics, we refer to the meaning of the word *Adivasi*, which is, as told earlier, the “original inhabitant.” The Right-wing Hindu groups refuse to consider the tribal people as the original inhabitants of India. The real strength of Hindu ideology comes from the notion that the Aryans were native to India, and the Hindus have

inhabited the land since ancient times.

The literal meaning of the word *Vanvasi* is “forest dwellers.” It is a term preferred by right-wing Hindu organizations to refer to the tribal populations of India. At the same time, rightist organizations prefer this term to downplay the idea of original inhabitants and include them in the mainstream as just another group living in rural and densely forested areas. *Vansvasi* is a controversial term for many, not so much because of the literal meaning but also because it replaces the term *Adivasi*.

Anusuchit Janjati (Scheduled Tribes):

The official legal term to denote tribal people in India is *anusuchit janjati* (scheduled tribes). However, there is also a body of opinion that sees the word *Adivasi* as derogatory. In a survey conducted by Bali published on the website for wordpress, the tribal people were asked whether they find the word *Adivasi* derogatory. The majority of the people who posed for the interview expressed reservations about *Adivasi* and expressed their uneasiness at being called *Adivasi*. Though it might be so in the context of a specific section of the tribal community, this is undoubtedly not true in the case of the majority of the tribal population. They raise their concerns under the name *Adivasi* and have no reservations in self-identifying as *Adivasis*. The survey seems to hint toward tribal people’s preference for the official term *anusuchit janjati* over *Adivasi*.

Other evidence, however, does not support the optional name that the survey seems to suggest. For example, no literature indicates that the tribal people prefer to self-identify as *anusuchit janjati*.

Moreover, the survey seems to ignore the fact that even if the term is legally correct, it is not free from stigma as many sections of the Hindu society try to associate being Scheduled Tribes with being socially backward and hence a burden to the progress of the society and nation in general.

Conclusion:

In her narrative, it is clear that Rigoberta Menchú has come to terms with the reality of the unavoidable existence of mixed raced people in Guatemala. She understands that history cannot be undone. However, her account points to the bitterness the indigenous communities hold on the whole event of the meeting of the two worlds. The indigenous communities of

Mesoamerica are very much aware of the consequence of the conquest, and they impute their present problems to the conquest. If we look at the nature of institutions exerting influence on these two groups, we find many similarities. Both groups suffer from displacement, usurpation, and persecution of a similar nature in the guise of progress and development. Both groups are victims of a similar mechanism of sabotage.

Mulnivasi, although the closest linguistic translation of *indígena*, lacks those essences of the term *Indígena* in the Indian context. Moreover, as we saw in our study, the claim for the name *mulnivasi* is made by the Dalits and Dravidian groups as well, whose issues and concerns are not always compatible with that of the *indígenas* of Mesoamerica. Therefore, a mere literal translation will deprive the Hindi readers of the essence, which can help correlate in the context of India.

Vanvasi is another term that somewhat connects with the type of tribal communities generally belong. The *indígenas* of Mesoamerica, too, are forest dwellers. Nevertheless, they have had a documented history of urban life, and to translate *indígena Vanvasi* into Hindi will under-represent their spatial reach and ignore the autochthony of the Indian tribes. Moreover, *Vanvasi*, in many other ways, goes entirely against the spirit of the term *Indígena*, which stands against institutionalized oppression of colonialism, something which the word *Vanvasi* not only seems to overlook but also seems to endorse concomitantly.

The term *Anusuchit Janjati* has no sociocultural element with which the word *Indígena* is imbued. Any inclination to translate the term *Indígena* into Hindi as *Anusuchit janjati* (to preserve the integrationist idea) will result in the loss of the socio-cultural attributes of the terms *Indígenas*.

If we read the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, we will find that the concerns raised on behalf of the indigenous community exist parallels when we look at the present and historical context Indian tribes expressed in the name *Adivasis*. The name *Adivasi* captures the nuances, subtleties, and poetics of the word *Indígena*.

However, what we have still not talked about is the difference in the basic makeup of these two communities. Regardless of their similarities of concerns and the similarity of oppressive tools acting upon them, the two groups exist independently. Their past and present experiences of colonialism make them understand each other better, but the two groups still have their own

psychosocial and sociocultural matrix. On closer examination of the difference between the two terms,

Adivasis and the *Indígenas*, one will notice a vast difference in their psychological, social and cultural makeup. Rigoberta Menchú dedicates hours in her autobiography to explaining the specificities of her people and what sets them apart. With pride in the name *Indígena*, she tells us how it is like to be an *Indígena*, how it is like to be born *indígena*, to be raised *Indígena*, and to die *Indígena*.

Similarly, people in India who identify themselves as *Adivasis* have a set of attributes that they believe set them apart from the rest of the communities. One might rightly extrapolate from the pieces of literature on *Adivasis* and *Indígenas* that, in many ways, they are in the same situation because of their colonial past. One can draw many similarities regarding their social, cultural, and psychological makeup. However, we know that notwithstanding these similarities (which often get undue highlighted the Indigenous would not prefer calling themselves *Adivasis* even in the Indian context. Similarly, the *Adivasis* would not prefer to be called themselves *Adivasis* in translation. In the end, it depends mainly on the translator's approach. Suppose the translator wants to take the text from the reader. In that case, he/she might well translate *Indígena* into *Adivasi* in Hindi, as we saw that the term *Adivasi* is much better than other terms used for indigenous people in India. However, we also know that such liberty might well be interpreted as callous translation because the terms *Adivasi* might not carry the essence of the term *Indígena* in its entirety. Therefore, we notice that all the terminologies chosen here fall short being a close equivalence of the term *Indígena*. The target readers are ready to take the pain of approaching the translated text in the sociocultural context of the original text, in that case, it is better to leave *Indígena* as *Indígena* while translating the term into Hindi.

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