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In Memoriam: Sociologist and Activist Abhay Xaxa

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A reflection on the life and legacy of Abhay Xaxa, visionary Adivasi leader, teacher, and thinker, and what the relative silence around his untimely death says about us.

On 18 March 2015, near the Barwadih block office in Jharkhand's Latehar district, a group of about 60 Adivasi men publicly defecated on copies of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's bill to amend the 2013 Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act. The [bill sought to weaken](#) the hard-won and long overdue safeguards of social impact assessment and informed consent to acquisition. It was a throwback to when state and industry could forcibly displace rural—especially Adivasi—communities, and acquire their land and common property resources.

The protest at Barwadih, organized by the National Campaign on Adivasi Rights, got the mainstream media to briefly focus on Adivasi dispossession. The campaign's Abhay Flavian Xaxa, a young sociologist, Oraon Adivasi activist, and writer, had also organised a march against the bill the previous day in his native village Jashpur, in Chhattisgarh, which unfolded under heavy police presence and scant media attention. In Barwadih, Xaxa [countered](#) the charge of 'uncivility':

“If our poop protest is considered uncivil, then tell me what is civil in this country. Displacing millions of Adivasis for satisfying corporate greed is civil? Killing thousands of unarmed Adivasis in [the] name of counter insurgency is civil? Trafficking lakhs of innocent ... Adivasi girls to cities is civil? Blatantly cheating the Adivasis from the constitutional promises is civil? What type of civility do you expect from a person who was uprooted from their land not once, but twice in the name of national interest and is now threatened for a third time?”

Sharp, creative, and multi-faceted, Abhay Xaxa could articulate the hypocrisies of Indian society in salty metaphors. He deftly showed how policies drafted in high offices and in thrall to special economic interests affected India's marginalised in devastating ways. On 14 March, while on a visit to Siliguri to meet with tribal groups, Abhay suffered a heart attack and passed away within minutes. He survived by his partner Vani, and children Sara and Manav. Abhay's shock death has left many of us reflecting on an activist-intellectual with a large heart and a sense of mischief, whom our society let die at the mere age of 43.

The loss was best articulated by the polymath and founder of the Adivasi Academy, Ganesh Devy, as he recalled his first meeting in 2006 with Abhay. “Three decades ago, in a conversation at the Adivasi Academy, [historian] Ramachandra Guha had asked me, ‘Why is it that there has been no Ambedkar among Adivasis?’ Nearly ten years later, as I was interviewing Abhay [for a fellowship], this question surfaced in my memory. I felt as if Abhay could probably be the answer for that question. In my subsequent conversations with him, and through his work in bringing young Adivasis together for re-thinking the entire Adivasi question in India, Abhay continued to keep that hope alive in my heart.”

The Making of an Indigenous Activist

Abhay defined himself thus: “Sociologist by profession, Indigenous Activist by heart!” From his formative years in Chhattisgarh as a leader in Adivasi student unions and as a researcher-activist, to the past decade in Delhi, working with Dalit and Adivasi networks, alongside acquiring a PhD in Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Abhay's motivating force was justice. He cared for justice on all fronts—social, economic, environmental, and in the realm of education and knowledge production.

Abhay's drive was born in a milieu of social discrimination, state violence, and economic exploitation at the hands of the upper castes, moneylenders, and contractors, which he witnessed through his childhood and as a college student. For example, when Abhay was in secondary school, he tasted arbitrary state power of a kind which regularly assaults the dignity of many Adivasis. A forest guard caught him collecting firewood near the village, and arrested him under the colonial-era [Indian Forest Act, 1927](#).

Abhay, who was collecting the firewood to prepare the day's meal at his school hostel, was eventually released on bail. Last year, when the Supreme Court [ordered the eviction](#) of lakhs of Adivasis and forest dwellers from their land, Abhay drew on his own experiences to urgently mobilise civil society and grassroots groups, and lobby with governments. He planned protests against the ruling, which he called the outcome of “[Brahmanical environmentalism](#)”. The court eventually put the ruling on hold.



Dr. Abhay Xaxa
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The supreme court was told that 2 million Adivasis are sharpening their axes and arrows before marching to Delhi, so this stay. No benevolence @AdivasisMatter @cjpindia @reachxdias

9:01 AM · Mar 1, 2019 · Twitter for Android

In the early 1990s, Abhay dropped out of college due to economic hardship in the family. His father, one of the first Adivasi judges in the state, had lost his job—a termination Abhay ascribed to caste prejudice. Abhay briefly ran his own business by purchasing a jeep—through a government loan scheme for Scheduled Tribes—to ferry villagers around Jashpur. As he recalled with pride, the jeep at that time was the first in the district to be owned and run by an Adivasi, and which was a success because it did not overcharge or cheat villagers.

Abhay eventually returned to college, convinced by the need to ‘educate and agitate’. His younger brother Ajay told us that it was in these years that Abhay became active as an organiser and a leader in the Adivasi Students Union, raising issues such as unpaid scholarships, kerosene for the students, high dropout rates, caste discrimination, and poor conditions of Adivasi hostels.

As Abhay recounted in an [interview](#) in 2011 to a portal for Dalit and Adivasi students, his growing up years made him sad, bitter, and angry, but also steeled him to challenge social exclusion life-long. He observed, “To be able to continue studies and stay in Adivasi hostels, [the students] just needed to be given 100 kg of rice and 20 kg of pulses per year, but that too they could not afford. I feel extremely fortunate to be able to complete my studies, though with some breaks in between due to finances. I think this created a deep impact in my mind and I was always very conscious about this. And as I grew up, I started looking for the answers.”

After graduating in sociology and law, Abhay briefly worked in Hindi news media, but found editors hostile to his concerns. He took up research and activism, working across social movements, research institutions and NGOs on development-induced displacement, distress migration, bonded labour, and fair wages for forest workers such as tendu-leaf pluckers.

In 2007, he became the first Adivasi student from Chhattisgarh to win the Ford Foundation International Fellowship for postgraduate study at the University of Sussex. This was the fellowship for which Devy had interviewed Abhay. Abhay chose to study anthropology. As he laughingly explained in the 2011 interview: “I wanted to see what non-Adivasis have written about us.”

The Years of Struggle

Despite his struggles, or perhaps because of them, Abhay was never bitter or invested in drawing hard boundaries of insider/outsider. As Devy pointed out, “Abhay was a thinker among the Adivasis, and an Adivasi among thinkers. He could be equally restless in both worlds. He was genuinely interested in ideas and had an intellectual bandwidth that reminded me of another friend I lost too early, D R Nagaraj”, the thinker and writer from Karnataka.

The year at Sussex broadened Abhay’s world and put him in touch with international discourses on indigenous peoples and movements, recalled Azizur Rahman, a close friend from the fellowship cohort, and now an Asian Development Bank consultant. Xavier Dias, a veteran activist in Jharkhand, concurred: “Abhay returned with a fire in his heart, restless to fight for his people, and to give them the best options.”

These were the years when Adivasi communities of central-eastern India’s forested mineral belt were facing the brunt of resource grabs on a massive scale, due to mining and land acquisition projects. Also, the state-Maoist conflict was escalating across the region, bringing counter-insurgency operations, militarisation, vigilante violence and human rights abuses. Abhay plunged into the task of highlighting these excesses. It was at one such programme held in Ranchi in 2010 on extrajudicial ‘encounter’ killings that we first met Abhay. We were struck by how thoughtful and engaging he was, even as he wore his challenges lightly with an infectious smile.

Courage was a liability when the state was tarring activism and dissent as ‘Maoist activity’. Frontline Adivasi activists like Abhay were particularly vulnerable.

Stan Swamy, a Jesuit anthropologist in Ranchi, recalls, “The Abhay I knew was literally a [‘without’] bhay [‘fear’]. He would barge into a government office and blast the officer for what he was doing against Adivasis, or for what he was not doing that he should have done for the Adivasi.” But courage was a liability when the state was tarring activism and dissent as ‘Maoist activity’. Frontline Adivasi activists like Abhay, Bastar’s Soni Sori, and Jharkhand’s Gladson Dungdung, were particularly vulnerable to harassment and criminalisation. As Swamy recalls, “Within a short time it was communicated to Abhay that if he went on doing what he was, he would find himself in jail indefinitely with multiple cases against him.”

Based in Delhi, Abhay initially worked as a Research Fellow at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, and from 2012 onwards until 2019 as a Program Coordinator with the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). He had come to believe in the importance of cross-learning between Dalit and Adivasi movements across issues such as discrimination in public spending and higher education, the poor enforcement of the Prevention of Atrocities Act, and forest and land rights programmes. Close friend and NCDHR colleague Beena Pallical recounted, “He constantly argued for the need for Dalit and Adivasi struggles to move together, given our common experiences of exclusion and exploitation.”

Travelling extensively, Abhay also became an anchor for grassroots groups, activists, student bodies, and scholars across the country, serving as Convenor for the National Campaign for Adivasi Rights, and a Co-convenor of the [Tribal Intellectual Collective](#). Koraput-based researcher Sharanya Nayak recalled Abhay’s visit to Malkangiri to look at the issue of bonded labour, and their deep friendship since: “He was very perceptive and could make deep connections between people’s experiences and the larger systemic violence that is happening to the indigenous peoples.”

“I am not your data, nor am I your vote bank/ I make my own tools to fight my own battle”

Over the years, Dias said, “Abhay developed his own understanding of the law, budgets, tribal sub-plans, policies in scheduled areas, and [made training modules](#), thinking about what would empower his people.” He developed a special interest in analysing [illegal diversions and shortfalls](#) in budgetary allocations for Scheduled Tribes, which effectively had robbed Adivasis over decades of their statutory due. “On budget day, Abhay would be that rare voice on TV who would be telling us what it meant for tribal communities,” said Abhay’s doctoral thesis supervisor L. Lam Khan Piang. “There is nobody to do that now.”

It was around this time in 2011 that Abhay wrote his oft-quoted poem ‘[I Am Not Your Data](#)’:

*I am not your data, nor am I your vote bank,
I am not your project, or any exotic museum project,
I am not the soul waiting to be harvested,
Nor am I the lab where your theories are tested.
I am not your cannon fodder, or the invisible worker,
Or your entertainment at India habitat center,
I am not your field, your crowd, your history,
your help, your guilt, medallions of your victory.
I refuse, reject, resist your labels,
your judgments, documents, definitions,
your models, leaders and patrons,
because they deny me my existence, my vision, my space.
Your words, maps, figures, indicators,
they all create illusions and put you on a pedestal
from where you look down upon me.
So I draw my own picture, and invent my own grammar,
I make my own tools to fight my own battle,
For me, my people, my world, and my Adivasi self!*

Building Knowledge for Social Change

Abhay’s doctoral work at JNU melded his interests in sociology and law. He researched how Jharkhand’s land laws marginalised Adivasi communities, and how Adivasi responses shaped their relationship with the Indian state. The questions that Abhay and many other scholars like him posed come from their immediate lives and struggles, but often find a hostile and alienating environment within the rigid conventions of the academy. Abhay had to change supervisors mid research, and when he submitted his thesis in 2018 he called it the “most arduous journey of his life.”

As his supervisor Piang remarked, Abhay was consumed with taking his knowledge to marginalised spaces, and with social change. “He was full of ideas and rarely on campus. I would ask, ‘Where are you Abhay?’ and he would be travelling across the country, holding training workshops or presenting papers.”

Over the last year, Abhay had begun experimenting with interactive formats on social media to communicate challenges like the 2019 Supreme Court eviction order more widely. Last March, Abhay came together with the digital platform Adivasi Lives Matter and us to film [a primer](#) for Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities. It explained their rights to free, prior, informed consent under the Forest Rights Act in the face of forestland grabs by the powerful state-corporate combine.

Abhay’s more recent writings pushed the frontiers of imagination on Adivasiyat: on how to rescue indigeneity from identitarianism, and link it to democracy, environmental justice, climate change, and sustainability. Over the past year, he was editing a volume on Adivasi communities in a multi-part series for Penguin titled ‘Rethinking India’. Friends like Nayak and Ankush Vengurlekar, the founder of Adivasi Lives Matter, asserted that Abhay’s aim was to rally more and more people in the cause of Adivasiyat. As his NCDHR colleagues Pallical and N Paul Divakar wrote in a recent [obituary](#), “He refused to accept Adivasis as an esoteric-ethnic community, but also felt that they bring a strength of sustainability, which the wider society needs to accept.”

Abhay raised questions about why the fields of environmental studies, climate change and sustainability persisted in excluding Adivasis and forest-dwelling communities.

In a talk Abhay delivered at Ashoka University in February 2019, he elaborated on the concept of ‘indigenocracy’—bringing together notions of citizenship with responsibility towards one another and the environment. He also raised troubling questions about why the fields of environmental studies, climate change and sustainability persisted in excluding Adivasis and forest-dwelling communities. Why were universities, forest departments, or environmental NGOs, he asked, hostile to staffing Adivasi scholars and leaders, and recognizing the knowledge and contributions of these communities in nurturing forest ecosystems?

As Abhay often pointed out [in public meetings](#) on higher education, our universities had failed students from marginalised backgrounds, like Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi. Equally, they have failed to make room for teachers like Abhay. Just 2.2% of the teaching staff in higher education come from Scheduled Tribe backgrounds, as per [a 2017-18 survey](#). Behind these statistics lie the perseverance, struggles, and defeats of numerous scholars like Abhay.

On getting his doctorate, Abhay was keen to relocate to central-east India so that he could work closely with students from marginalised communities, and be closer to frontline challenges, and his family in Jashpur. But he found himself up against damaging red tape, like when universities did not recognise his Sussex master’s degree since it had a duration of a year, as opposed to the two-year programme in India. He felt particularly crushed when St. Xavier’s College in Ranchi did not select him for a teaching position.

In conversations with us over the past year, Abhay often expressed a sense of fatigue and dejection. Seeing the brutal crackdown on civil society organizations and cases filed against activists and scholars like Sudha Bharadwaj, Stan Swamy and Anand Teltumbde, Abhay had mused to us, “I am not sure if tomorrow, the government were to do away with reservations for Dalits and Adivasis, people will be able to come together and protest in India.” He also suffered bouts of poor health. As he told an interviewer in 2019, “[This is a long fight.](#)” His [poem ‘A Republic of Lost Memory’](#) reflected his anguish:

Dear Republic,

*When your best citizens are killed on the streets,
and piled in the jails.*

While the traitors adorn your high offices.

Something is terribly wrong with you!

No Academic Attended

In the past days, there has been a silence from social scientists, and the wider academia, about the snuffing out of one of its brightest stars. It is largely students groups, Dalit and Adivasi networks, and alternative media outlets who have marked Abhay's death - another parallel with Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi.

In a recent paper Abhay had shared with us, he reflected on the 'epistemic violence' in online spaces that deny marginalised peoples the capacity to learn and know. Privileged Indians see Adivasis, Dalits, and Bahujans through casteist prejudice and caricatures, and encounter them largely as cheap labour. As powerful essays in The India Forum by [the historian Maroona Murmu](#) and [the economist Aditi Priya](#) testify, even the academic establishment remains hostile to their struggles. It does not celebrate their success and creativity in life, and remains largely indifferent to their deaths.

A day after Abhay was brought back from Siliguri to be buried in Jashpur, his close friend and writer Gladson Dungdung piercingly wrote: "If someone this qualified is humiliated in this way, will his mind be at peace? Will he not suffer a heart attack? But we will keep fighting, for recognition, for our identity, for our earth, for our forests, hills and rivers."

"It takes a long time to incubate an organic intellectual, and leader like Abhay," Dias reflected with sadness. "In these past years, I felt that he was coming into his own. He was becoming someone who could have mobilised Adivasi people, without getting absorbed into the electoral party system and being co-opted into doing its bidding. Which is why his death at this young age is so troubling."

In early March, just days before his sudden death, Abhay had spoken on the phone with his younger brother Ajay. In the conversation, Abhay had returned to a recurrent concern: "Dada talked about our village, and said we must do something to ensure economic opportunities here itself, so that our people do not have to migrate to the cities and be exploited." As Ajay spoke to us, the media was awash with images of thousands of desperate migrants abandoned by the government and the cities, trying to flee home to their villages in the face of a [criminally ill-planned lockdown](#). The absence of Abhay's voice, calling for a more just and humane India, rang loud.