

(De-)bordering children's agency

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gsc**Pallawi Sinha** 

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Abstract

Children's agency is inextricably linked to dominant, 'western' conceptualisations of human rights, and remains predominantly representative of northern childhood(s) with wanting imagination about its wider sociopolitical contexts. Despite this, and the growing recognition of its significance, iterations of children's agency centre primarily on children as social actors, often obfuscating its economic, material, democratic or political renderings. Children's social agency, itself, continues to be encumbered by social stratifications and hierarchies, notions of citizenship and politics of governance. The repercussions of bordering agency to suit 'adultist', paternalistic or northern priorities can result in its fetishisation and exclude southern children's agency thus distort knowledge-making. The multiple lives of children in the postcolonies – beyond innocence, protectionism and individualism – inform on the diverse ways in which children address, exercise or negotiate their agency. This article, then, seeks to decentre conceptualisations of agency. Thus, it draws on research with the indigenous Hill Sabar communities of Jharkhand, India, framed by postcolonial underpinnings. While the study observed children and young people's (CYP) agency in wide-ranging matters that shaped their sociocultural, material, historical, spatial, structural and discursive realities, here, the focus remains on their familial, social and political agency. Findings reveal how within 'collectivist' communities CYP often enact their agency relationally and reciprocally. They foreground the assemblages of agency that Hill Sabar CYP navigate, adopt and negotiate, intergenerationally, communally and regionally. In response, the article proposes a de-bordering of children's agency to move beyond the siloed, individualist, adultist and northern approaches that constrict it. This, the paper notes, can offer radical sites for interrogation or 'new' insights to attend to its under-theorisation, and perhaps 'free' the concept by 'diversifying' dialogue and research on agency.

Keywords

children's agency, de-bordering agency, indigenous and postcolonial childhoods, familial, social and political agency, agency, relationality and reciprocity, assemblages of agency

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Introduction

Childhood has been one of the most governed, discussed and contested subjects in the past few decades. Ward (1978: 9) contemplates,

Since childhood is one of the few absolutely universal experiences it is not surprising that people have an inward picture. . . of an ideal childhood. . . It sifts through our selective and self-censored memory as a myth and idyll. . . .

Such an acknowledgement of childhood – as distinctly situated – is, however, shaped primarily by dominant imaginaries (self-censored) and the social structures (selective) within which they occur. These concerns have been reflected in the ‘new sociology’ of childhood, which conceptualised children as social agents. This not only enabled childhood constructions to move beyond previous arguments locating it as natural or biological but also directed attention to children’s agentic capabilities. James and Prout (1997: 8) assert, ‘Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives. . . .’ While the concern of this article is not to attempt the gargantuan task of synthesising the varying lenses on childhood, it is pertinent to observe here that conceptualisations of childhood have retained the modernist logics (say, individualism, universalism) and fashion childhoods thus their agency in Anglo-European traditions (Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Liebel, 2020; Nieuwenhuys, 1998).

With the globalising tendencies of the world, the proliferation of market economies and the commodification of education and childcare, in the 1990s, childhoods in the global south were confronted by western and adultist framings, which became particularly problematic for children’s lives. First, such convergences of ideologies and policies devised the ‘west’ or the Global North¹ as the centre of knowledge-production and dissemination, assigning the ‘east’ or the South as the site for data extraction thereby peripheralising ‘other’ epistemes (Connell, 2007; Meghji, 2021; Takayama, 2016). This not only distorted knowledge that may have otherwise enriched disciplinary fields but also exacerbated epistemic injustice (Abebe et al., 2022; Bhambra, 2014; Santos, 2015). Secondly, it perpetuated ‘gold standards’, epistemic frameworks and measurements for child development, children’s rights and education, which framed western notions of the ‘ideal’ child as the ‘normative index’ for translocal planning (Balagopalan, 2011: 291; Nieuwenhuys, 2010; Nsamenang, 2005). Confronted by this dyad of dominance – adultist and western – both southern childhoods and childhood studies signified ‘extraversion’ (Connell, 2007), in espousing hegemonic frames of childhood governance and epistemic authority, devised elsewhere. Such imaginary yet palpable north-south divides – centre-periphery, sites of production-extraction or ideal-non-ideal childhoods – ensured the process of bordering children’s lives continued beyond the prevailing adult-child dichotomy. This has resulted in grave misrepresentations and failures in understanding,² rendering children in ‘peripheral’ contexts in deficit discourses, seen as a site for reform or ‘child saving’ (Wells, 2008).

It was with growing research and scholarship situated within southern contexts that ruptured these logics, underscored by the diverse conditions of children’s everyday lives. Such deliberations on childhoods have directed an ‘ontological turn’ (Spyrou, 2022), one that recognises children’s multiple realities (see Balagopalan, 2002; Nieuwenhuys, 1998; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2011). It has foregrounded, too, the relational and intergenerational nature of childhoods that embrace the human and non-human entanglements over the Cartesian dualisms (Escobar, 2021; Santos, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). This has necessitated a particular examination of children’s agency. On the one hand, children’s agency is inextricably linked to modernist conceptualisations (of individual liberty, universal truth, rationality, self-determination), and remains predominantly representative

of the ‘western’ child as the rights-bearing, autonomous subject (Durham, 2008; Spyrou et al., 2018; Wall, 2017). On the other hand, it continues to be encumbered by social hierarchies, notions of citizenship and dominant structures that define the politics of governance (Smith, 2012). Moreover, despite the growing recognition of its significance, iterations of children’s agency centre on children as social actors, experts of their *social lives*, which situate it firmly within the private rather than public realm.

Such privileging of children’s agency as an individual act or capacity for decision-making that is narrowly concentrated within their social locales evidences the dominant, structural and conceptual boundaries that frame it. These boundaries ‘border’ agency through hierarchical binarisations – whether adult-child, public-private, individual-relational, discursive-affective, southern-northern, or human-non-human. Thus, borders draw margins distinguishing ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’ (Wohl, 2015) and reproduce exclusionary mechanisms (Spangsberg and Ydesen, 2024). Borders, then, become representative of separations, exclusions and constrictions they propagate (Mohanty, 2003). For instance, Eurocentric knowledge forms are reductive of agency within morally dubious contexts (say, of child soldiers) or the spatiality of agency (primarily centred on the home or classroom) often discounts the streets, political arenas and digital platforms as distinctly revelatory spaces of children’s agentic action. Nonetheless, Bordonaro (2012: 422) notes, agency is observed as ‘an index of freedom’ in current childhood studies, despite being ‘pre-emptively selective’, which obscures the dimensions of structural and symbolic violence confronted by peripheralized childhoods.

Examining the repercussions of bordering agency, in this way, can expose the limits of the nature and scope of agency and how these can exacerbate the ‘silencing’ of southern children’s voice (Spivak, 1988). Such an exercise highlights, too, the multiple ways in which children address, exercise or negotiate their agency in the postcolonies, beyond ‘adultist’, paternalistic or western prioritisation for childhood innocence, protectionism and individualism (Abebe, 2019; Balagopalan, 2019a; Cavazzoni et al., 2020; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). Ultimately, this article proposes a de-bordering of agency to attend to the tensions emerging from the plurality of children’s lives and the narrow boundaries that constrict it. The following section then contextualises the research with indigenous children and young people (CYP) in Jharkhand, India, before exploring agency within their ‘ways of being’.

Indigeneity, childhoods and ‘agency’: Research paradigms and paradoxes

The article draws on my doctoral research with the indigenous Hill Sabar communities of Jharkhand, India. Undertaken over almost 11 months, it engaged 23 families (including extended members), 10 chiefs and elders, eight youth (18–24 years) and 16 children and young people (aged 6–17 years), across six hamlets. The study aimed to elicit rich ‘peripheral’ insights on ‘other’ epistemic traditions and understand the community’s continued disengagement from formal education. Thus, it adopted a qualitative stance underpinned by postcolonial framings. A postcolonial framework was pertinent to understanding the historical relationship between power structures and hierarchies of knowledge; difference, dominant-subjugate binaries, hybridity and the impact of ongoing colonisation on the once colonised sites (Bhabha, 1994; Bhabra, 2014; Smith, 1999, respectively). To adhere to the ethical precedence of postcolonial, indigenous and emancipatory research, the study sought to alleviate exoticized, essentialist views and emphasise indigenous knowledge-making practices and priorities.

In response, it employed ethnomethodology (see Coulon, 1995; Garfinkel, 1967), envisaging research as cyclical process of social action, participatory interaction and reflexive response.³ This

enabled social actors to participate in the very ‘nature of the object of the study’, discerning the ‘dynamics of disruption of the object. . . and the relinking of the chain’ (Spivak, 1988: 272). Concomitantly, it allowed the researcher to ‘explain the lives of others without violating their reality’ (Lather, 1991: 61). It necessitated also the acknowledgment of the researcher’s positions of power and privilege, and duality as the insider (say, whose early years were in Jharkhand) and outsider (non-indigenous).⁴ One way this was mitigated was by the researcher acknowledging their positionality and learner status, from the onset. Further, the researcher learnt Kharia (Sabar dialect) to diminish language barriers. The Sabar found this amusing since it was ‘dying language’, mostly used by the elderly, and the researcher’s proficiency was rudimentary, but it did enable access. Data was generated in the regionally-derived dialect, which the researcher largely understood but was assisted by a translator in the field. Additionally, 30% of all data sets were transcribed by 2 indigenous practitioners to ensure rigour and account for researcher bias. The study also aligned itself to community-informed ethics alongside prescribed guidelines (say, British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018; University Ethics Committee). The researcher ensured this by learning the cultural registers and local codes of conduct during the pilot and partaking in community meetings, thereon. A thematic analysis of the textual, spatial and audio-visual data was undertaken with the researcher reading and re-reading data over months to identify emerging codes, categories and final themes. This allowed for triangulation of data, scrutiny of any misrepresentations and ‘going deep’, foregrounding participants’ evolving perspectives across data sets (Swartz, 2011)

Furthermore, postcolonial framings not only offered ways to disrupt the ‘singularity of stories’ (Balagopalan, 2019b) reproduced by the north, but also enabled a critical approach to the colonisation of childhoods, itself. The colonisation of knowledges of the ‘rest’ by the ‘west’ occurred at a similar historical point as the emergence of the traditionally accepted discourses on childhood (Chen, 2010; see also Cannella and Viruru, 2004). As with the imperialist traditions that characterised, categorised and segregated native populations as ‘child-like’ and ‘deviant’ (Liebel, 2020; Nandy, 1984; Nayak, 2006; Rollo, 2018, respectively), hegemonic framings in contemporary India have often relegated indigenous peoples to a ‘primitive’ status without a rigorous analysis of their historical, sociomaterial, temporal or political contexts (George et al., 2024; Kundu, 1994). Take for instance, the Indian state’s adoption of global agendas and norms for education in enculturating developmentally-appropriate curricula (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013). This does not account for differences in indigenous children’s developmental trajectories or their socio-spatial, temporal and ecological ways of learning and ‘doing’. For example, the Hill Sabar CYP could climb trees at the age of 5 years, name 20–30 species of plants and their medicinal properties by 7–8 years, employ the physical environment as an educational tool, transmit historical knowledge orally, and learnt different skills, intergenerationally. Yet these strategies remained absent from their formal curricula or settings. Maithreyi et al.’s (2022: 784) findings also problematise such erasures, ‘prompting an interrogation of the epistemic ordering, goals and functions of modern schooling’. Such exclusionary practices have perpetuated ‘asymmetrical ignorance’ (Chakrabarty, 2000/2007) about the postcolonial figure of the indigenous ‘Indian’⁵ child, peripheralized by the dominant imaginaries.

Indigenous communities account for 8.6% of India’s population, of which 38 million are children (Government of India, 2011; Rustagi et al., 2011). They are a heterogenous group⁶ yet constrained by their monolithic official delineation as the Scheduled Tribes⁷ (*Tribal Health in India Report*: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2018). There are a range of statistical observations (on household, health, gender, education or socioeconomic status) projecting their advances in these measures. What is notable, however, is that the Hill Sabar are not only absent from these national indicators⁸ but also indigenous children’s subjective, everyday lives have largely remained invisible from India’s dominant imaginaries. Where children are

engaged, often the focus is on their health and education – enrolment, outcomes or skilling-up strategies – which continue to adapt developmental or psychological approaches (see, for instance, Joshi, 2010; Kapur, 2016; Maithreyi, 2019). Invariably, the inequalities confronted by indigenous children are located conveniently within cultural relativistic frameworks rather than an acknowledgement of structural barriers, leading to their exotification or invisibilisation. Simultaneously, seen as objects of concern that act as unproductive state citizens, they are berated for disrupting normativity within the wider dominant society and institutions. For instance, dominant caste-class officials often described the Hill Sabar as ‘shy’, ‘lazy’, ‘alcoholics’ with one practitioner chiding them, ‘you have no interest in work, improving your conditions, just lying around all day’ when they were resting after from wood-cutting.

Post-colonial masters of (neo)liberal India, in their pursuit of modernist aspirations, have thereon preferred to assume integrationist or assimilatory approaches to indigenous reform, social welfare provisioning and governance (see Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2018). This has significant implications for the complex power binaries that emerge since erroneous representations of indigenous childhoods are reproduced by, and set in contrast to the cultural standards of, the west or those in dominant positions. Further, such ‘spatialization of the state’ (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002) continues to confront a ‘politics of refusal’ (Hill Collins, 2000 [1990]; Young, 2001) by indigenous communities. In response, they reinstate their sovereignty over their lands, knowledges and practices in their dissent from capitalist commodification and the ‘apparatus of state power’ (Simpson, 2016: 328) as ungovernable subjects, in postcolonial India.⁹ A striking feature of this ‘othering’ is resistance and non-conformity thus outright rejection of education, health and social welfare provisioning.¹⁰ For example, when inquiring about their resistance to health provisioning, Soba (female, 16 years, Hamlet 1) revealed, ‘their methods are frightening’ also ‘others were scolded about trusting shamans and medicinal herbs, by dismissive medical experts’. Moreover, the Hill Sabar informed, three generations had attempted to engage with the dominant structures and norms (say, on education or housing). Eventually, they had collectively dissented to reassert their relational and reciprocal practices of knowledge-making, as ‘nobody really listened’ or ‘understood their ways’.

Given the exclusionary strategies adopted by the state and dominant structures, in the case of the Hill Sabar CYP, it is important to note that the western agentic ‘turn’ to childhood(s) is not innocuous. Rather it is always political and politicised, particularly when located narrowly within neoliberal imaginaries. With agency deemed to be a pervasive analysis of the ‘competent child’, issues of responsabilisation, on the one hand, and increasing forms of surveillance, on the other, begin to instrumentalise children’s life, practices and institutions. As Smith (2012: 34) argues, this can be hugely problematic as ‘Enjoined to become ‘responsible choosers’, within contemporary rationalities of rule children are positioned to a certain extent as self-governing’. She adds, however, this ‘promise of autonomy’ does not ascertain ways to challenge oppressive structures or the generational inequalities and may in fact ‘serve to stigmatize ‘irresponsible’ children and their parents’ (Smith, 2012) such as the Hill Sabar, thereby reproducing structural inequalities and essentialisms. Abebe (2019) cautions further that the valorisation or romanticisation of agency is particularly problematic for children facing marginalisation, poverty or oppressive structures. He argues that it not only perpetuates disadvantages but also deflects ‘attention away from those with moral and legal responsibilities— government and other social institutions’ and ‘individualizes that which requires collective action’ (Abebe, 2019: 16). This is particularly true of the Hill Sabar CYP. On the one hand, they are evidently able to garner their agentic and empowered positions within familial and socioecological structures, on the other hand, they are envisaged as ‘voiceless’, ‘disinterested’ or ‘incompetent’ by the dominant society, institutions and the state thus conveniently omitted, disregarded or rendered invisible. This certainly led to some disillusionment within

the Sabar CYP but it has also garnered acts of refusal and resistance to comply with the existing structural order. As with Simpson's (2014) anthropological work with the Mohawk peoples, such resistance is an act that reaffirms the illegitimacy of the dominant settler communities, its forms of governance or discourses of citizenship and development. For Simpson (2016: 330), refusal then is a praxis that reproduces historical consciousness and indigenous politics since it 'holds on to a truth, structures this truth as stance through time. . .'. The following section visibilises these, presenting data generated to foreground the Hill Sabar CYP's agency, attend to dominant oversights and dismantle hegemonic constructions.

Indigenous Sabar children's assemblages of agency

The Hill Sabar children and young people (CYP) were initially reticent about their involvement in my research. What was clear from the onset, however, was their capacity to exercise their agency within familial and social settings. Despite their parents and the community chiefs making concerted efforts to convince them, children (across the ages of 6–17 years) had resisted. For 3 months, till they had had the opportunity to observe me, and assess my work with their parents and perseverance, I remained an 'outsider'. When, eventually, they did engage, over one of the introductory activities I had asked what made them join me. The CYP were quick to recall, 'you always said *sarhou* [greetings] but never forced us', and 'our parents did not once say we *must* but thought we should see. . . since you have come from so far and have already been here more than our teacher, in the last 3 years'. Such agentic action – whether to partake in the research, which activities, or when – was not limited to my study rather it was performed across the landscapes they inhabited.

Drawing on the rich insights elicited, this section focusses particularly on Hill Sabar CYP's familial, social and political agency to consider its translation across their private and public realms. The adult, monocled gaze on the CYP of my study was invariably tainted with the hegemonic essentialisms reproduced by the dominant caste-class and professionals responsible for their health, care and education. Often, they rendered Sabar CYP as 'useless', 'aimless' and 'incompetent' with 'no interest in the world around them' or 'nothing to say, they just roam about doing nothing', but the findings revealed the limitations of the dominant lens on indigenous childhoods. Such a lens on 'difference' – that is centred on culture and pays limited attention to the disparate historical and political indigenous contexts, by those committed to (transnational) developmental agendas – is reminiscent of colonialist assumptions about the 'cultural Other'. This not only perpetuates socially dominant norms and reproduces essentialist generalisations but also invisibilises the boundaries that 'demarcate or individuate particular "cultures"' (Narayan, 1998: 92).

Observed extensively, Sabar CYP's agency was enacted and negotiated in their everyday familial lives (say, sibling care, broom-making, hunting or education) and in relation to other social members (Elders, neighbours, neighbouring hamlets) alongside non-human entities (jungles, lakes or animals). It is of significant note that the CYP adopted a reciprocal stance (to 'give back'). Further, they remained entangled with the subjectivities of the wider indigenous communities, which framed their political agency. Together, these created interwoven networks or 'assemblages' (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that moved fluidly from individual to the collective agency. Their agency unfolded, folded and ruptured, in non-linear and indivisible ways, in the very spaces between and of boundaries (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Assemblages of agency therefore are not fixed and evolve interdependently with intra-actions between the human and non-human, in non-hierarchical ways. Underlined by its relational, reciprocal and intersubjective quality, Hill Sabar CYP's agency lies in distinct contrast to the (neo-)liberal, dominant or western constructions. Hereon, I foreground such agentic assemblages.

Familial agency and relationality

Familial formations are predicated on kinship, socio-political alliances and social reproduction thus can become the object of power and knowledge and act as social forces of control and freedom within one's private life (Giddens, 1998; Rose, 1989). Thus, families may be seen as the original sites of democratisation. Over my fieldwork, the Hill Sabar CYP's agency unfolded across a myriad of lived realities that entailed their family (including extended members) whether in everyday practices, intergenerational responsibilities or familial priorities. For instance, unlike the majority of young people in India, particularly Hindus, who continue the tradition of 'arranged marriages' albeit more often with consent, today (Allendorf and Pandian, 2016; Banerji, 2023; Desai and Vanneman, 2018; Ray et al., 2020; Vikram, 2024), Hill Sabar CYP including girls have historically been, and continue to be, empowered to choose their partners/husbands, form civil partnerships or engage in polygamy.

Here, given India's improving yet abysmal rates of gender parity and violence,¹¹ it is imperative to foreground girls' agency within familial norms and structures. While the Hill Sabar acknowledge the gendered roles adopted within their community, often these were not rigid or oppressive rather were undertaken in consultation. Bella (17 years, female, Hamlet 2) noted,

A man and woman's workload are quite well divided. . . . We both go to the jungles but for different things; we both look after the house and our children but in different ways. . . . I can tell him what I can't/won't do and vice-versa. . . . *Ho* [Yes]?

Whilst attending the Sarhul puja (water festival marking new harvest) dance, I queried this further. A young Sabar male responded,

circles are made to connect. . . . Men and women are different, they ask for different things. . . . Life would be imbalanced without the other, their knowledge and advice.

As Narayan's (1998: 101) analyses of cultural and gender underscore, moving away from the dominant lenses on Sabar girls' lives resulted in encounters that revealed the particularities of their lived realities rather than reproducing 'fixed' and ahistorical picture of their agency. Despite their gendered roles, children definitively exhibited agency in performing these. For example, Sarto (female, aged 10 years, Hamlet 2) was happy to look after her younger siblings but enjoyed herding as she could 'go deep into the hills, sit, sing songs, be alone and think about the future by the river'. While customarily her brother's chore (whom she had accompanied when younger), upon discussions, her parents had decided they would share the responsibilities. These examples foreground the CYP's active negotiation of agency in navigating future lives, present interests and personal stances, and how families become the 'incubators of children's agency' (Oswell, 2013: 89)

Furthermore, when conversing about their children's absence from formal education settings, as observed, a majority of parents and grandparents resonated the following sentiment:

'They [early years workers, schoolteachers] have told us education is very good for our children' (Goha, father, 50 years, Hamlet 1). 'We think school education is important – to learn worldly manners, speak well, to learn quality thinking – so we have tried and tried but both our children just won't go' (Rubaya, mother, 32 years). Sabari (grandmother, 80 years) added, 'They did give it a try in the beginning, so we also understand, and we let them be.'

Children (aged 6–17 years) across the hamlets reiterated these findings. Soma (7 years, male, Hamlet 3) voiced his resistance to formal schooling, noting: 'I don't understand anything, so the teacher calls me *boka* [dim-witted]. I didn't want to come and my parents said okay, not to worry'.

Somvari (10 years, female, Hamlet 4) found herself enjoying the uniform (skirt and blouse) and lunch at school stating, 'it's different and I like trying out different things' but 'the timing and teacher coming when they want is difficult as I look after my younger sibling so I don't'. While Maki (11 years, male, Hamlet 5) added, 'I like moving about in the jungle, it is freeing, but school building is cage-like. I cannot pay attention, so I tried but have stopped'. Pratham (15 years, male, Hamlet 3) added,

All those years [was enrolled for 3 years in the past], I never even learned to write my name. . . what would be the point of wasting my time. . . I told my parents; my grandmother said she will teach me about *awshadhis* [medicine-making] so I help my community and I am good at it.

Unlike the essentialisms reproduced, the data above reveals the Hill Sabar CYP interest in engaging with dominant structures but refrain from assimilatory pedagogies and politics (Abebe, 2020; Simpson, 2014). Within, and beyond, these dichotomies, the CYP evidence their agency is not static but in flux, enacted across the ruptures and continuities of their diverse lives, experiences and concerns (Abebe, 2019). Children also exhibit power to influence decision-making within the family structure and negotiate agency intergenerationally with adults advising but generally prioritising children's views (Esser et al., 2016). Similarly, Hill Sabar CYP's social order accords them spaces to exercise their agency, discussed next.

Social agency and reciprocity

The Hill Sabar CYP actively engaged in communal dialogue, rituals or ceremonies and knowledge-making practices. It is in these instances that their socially agentic acts and capacities were observed in relation to their Elders, neighbours, peer and wider social networks alongside practices of reciprocity, mutuality and connectedness. Collectivist or communitarian arguments see the atomist self of liberal ideologies giving a false abstraction of selfhood since subjectivity is intrinsically bound with social connections (see Young, 1990). Bignall (2010: 6) adds, since the dialectal self is produced through social situations and experiences, embedded in situated social and historical conditions, within communitarian thought, agency is shaped by the social imaginary.

Equally, social agency observed within this study is a result of the community's perceptions of children, say, as 'thinking beings' with 'their own ways of doing this life that we [indigenous adults] can also learn from' (Bhudiya, male, 38 years, Chief Hamlet 6). Sokar (male, 30 years, Hamlet 4) opined 'children are the link to the past and the future, without them we cannot stay Sabar. So, we pass on everything we know so they will to their children and so on. . .' Sokar's partner Boona (22 years) added, 'they are the seeds and we the roots and the jungle is what nourishes us. . . But what are they [children and forests] without us and us without them?' Furthermore, the Hill Sabar CYP are taught to 'do things *sungh-sungh* (communally)' so they undertake life events such as birth or death ceremonies, 'as a whole' since 'responsibilities shared enhance joy and prosperity, while sorrow is halved' (Baadi, father, 36 years, Hamlet 2). Thus, it can be argued that children's agency is intrinsically linked to indigenous ontology framed by kinship with ancestors (past, present and future) and reciprocity.

Further, it was evident that the CYP were 'never left out' (Roka, Sabar Elder, Hamlet 2). Whether it was the first conversations held with the Chiefs and Elders, the introductory sessions with the families or communal meetings, the CYP were frequently in attendance, listening and sometimes offering their views. At one such meeting, the Elders were discussing the damage to their paths ruined by the increasing numbers of trucks. They felt certain pharmaceutical companies had sent them to procure medicinal seeds and plants. Boudhi (16 years, male, Hamlet 4) who worked in the neighbouring villages suggested, 'together the young people can start to

rebuild it before the [monsoon] rains start'. While Saali (14 years, female, informal *anganwadi* helper, Hamlet 6) proposed, 'My centre can help inform other hamlets; the teacher and I meet parents, she visits the houses sometimes, but this won't be enough, and we must bring it to the district magistrate's attention'. The Chiefs and Elders agreed these to be the appropriate actions. This example does not only demonstrate the CYP's social agency but also their reciprocity in 'giving back' to the community alongside young girl's voices being well-respected by the community, observed widely by the study.

Another important instance of Hill Sabar CYP's social agency enacted in reciprocal ways is evident from young people's learning and sharing of 'new knowledges' widely, which the dominant society presumed their disinterest in. For example, Santho (female, 16 years, Hamlet 3) elaborated how some CYP, had adapted the knowledge of solar power since electricity was unavailable in their jungles,

We found solar battery from our friends at the foothills. It works with the sun's light, what an idea! . . . So we took money from Elders, brought some here. . . we put one in each hamlet. . . Now they can light up their huts, listen to our songs and outside news on the radio. . . .

In several other instances the Hill Sabar CYP had demonstrated their social agency with 'new' knowledges, say, with some teaching others to cycle and operate mobile phones, or CYP and Elders finding solutions for irrigating water in hilly terrains, beyond their hamlet, where state provisioning was unavailable. This communal and reciprocal relationship is not limited to their human compatriots. Soba explained such 'sense of living', 'our duty is not just to look after our family and community but the animals, our environment and our places in the jungle [ancestral, burial, hunting/herding, water procurement sites]'. Manus (14 years, male, Hamlet 5) opined, 'We are connected to our [dead] ancestors, forests, lakes and animals. We see when they are sad or unhappy. If they die, we die, so we must care for them, make decisions that keep us all happy'.

Thus, the site made it abundantly evident that neither Sabar individuality nor their agency was suffocated by such communality, dismantling western world's concern for individualistic agency. However, this had created tensions with the 'outsiders' (political hopefuls, government officials or dominant society) proclaiming they 'do everything together and don't think with their *own* head' (State Official 1) and 'don't change their old ways, to progress' (Practitioner 2). To summarise, the Hill Sabar CYP are not only active social actors but also have the agency to 'act otherwise' and 'make a difference' within their social realms (Giddens, 1984: 14), also highlighted next.

Political agency and situated intersubjectivity

This section foregrounds Hill Sabar CYP's political awareness, stances, struggles, and agentic political enactments. Driven by data, the article notes CYP's political agency to be enmeshed with the subjective realities of their ancestors and kin, and the situated priorities of their affiliates in wider communities or settings (say, employment). Thus, it proposes 'situated intersubjectivity', which positions political agency within its particular paradigms, contexts and interwoven subjectivities. It is related to situated learning through peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), situational ethics that espouses relationality and mutuality (Sinha, 2017; Swartz, 2011) and 'connected sociologies' and histories that reveal entangled intra-actions of agency (Barad, 2007; Bhambra, 2007).

While there has been some albeit limited investigations around the sociocultural and educational practices adopted by indigenous communities, in India, there is minimal research emphasising the political agency of its children and young people. In my interviews with the third-sector practitioners and state officials, they often noted how the Hill Sabar CYP were politically

‘ignorant’, disengaged from democratic activities or ‘passive recipients of political agendas’, however, the data lies in contrast to such dominant assertions. It revealed the CYP’s acute awareness of the ‘political games’ performed for their benefit (Baali, 16 years, female, Hamlet 4). Baali explained,

On the one side we have the *badaa sahibs* (government officials), the other the Naxals and in the middle the touts. All say they want to help but look at our jungles, do you see help? Only the Sabar can make a change for the Sabar; all else is talk.

Where there is ‘help’, as with the government’s household’s quota of rations (such as rice, cooking oil), others (aged 12–19 years, responsible for procuring it) highlighted the mismanagement of, and corruption within, such provisioning. Budhiya (15 years, male, Hamlet 1) noted, ‘they give us wrong days of delivery or offer us 25, 28 or even 30 kgs instead of the 35 kgs assigned for each family only so that they can sell the elsewhere’.

Another example of their understanding of political performativity related to the dilapidated *indrawasas* (government funded houses) that remained abandoned. Saali (14 years, female) explained it was because ‘the district magistrates change so frequently, they come start the house then the next one comes, and the house just lies like this’. Pratham (15 years, male) noted, ‘no one has asked us what kinds of houses to build for us or we would like to live in but they [state officials] just got their friends as contractors to make money’. Moreover, Hill Sabar CYP demonstrated their knowledge of the wider politics that framed their lives. For instance, some commented on the *Forest Act* 2002 impinging on their lands in the name of conservation. Bella queried, ‘they [pharmaceutical companies] clean jungles out, how are they allowed to pillage our forests? . . . the *van rakshaks* (forest patrollers) don’t say anything to them but stop us’. Somvari (10 years, female) informed, ‘collecting medicinal herbs and seeds is difficult now as the trucks took them all’, while Boudhi (16 years, male) noted,

the Sabar only take from the forest what’s needed for our everyday use, not a seed more. . . we care for, respect and worship it, our mother, yet they [state] tell us we cannot move about our own forests. . . because we are destroying it. But are we or are they [private companies]?

These undercurrents of tensions between the state actors, its agendas and the Hill Sabar CYP were observable also at a community meeting, which they were attending to organise the death ceremony for one of their members. Bheem recounted,

‘The chemical factory has hurt many; children I am told were physically affected. *Dada* (brother) was also facing problems with them’. Boudhi added, ‘Brother could not go into the jungles because of the *van rakshak* so could gather food or materials. His cousin told him about the chemical factory, which was no good. . . it finally was his end’.

On another occasion, once the CYP were able to trust me, they revealed how the Naxalites (a guerilla group) had been watching me, evaluating my purpose within the jungles, with Bheem adding, ‘they had once shadowed our jungles’. Soral (female, 17 years, Hamlet 5) revealed further,

some years ago, our jungles had been infiltrated by the Naxals who told us – ‘we are here for you people, to protect your lands . . .’ - we believed them, fed and hosted them. . . but then they stayed for long, changed and demanded more food, stole. . . , misbehaved. . . so finally the Sabar chased them out with bows and arrows. . . .

It is important to note here that Sabar CYP's agency is not limited to their political awareness but also evident in the political choices they make or the actions they undertake. Some of these events I was invited to, by the young people. Soral informed of her participation alongside Bheem to petition for a state inquiry against a chemical factory,

we went house to house, first, to see who had suffered and build a case for the state; *dada* [lead activist] had called everyone for a meeting; the manager found out and threatened to call the police, but we still heard mothers and family members.

When I had visited the area, women cautiously opened up to me but alerted that we were being observed. Eventually, a man did approach me warning my 'research could come to a sudden stop'. Bhoudi further related his experiences of protesting for the protection of indigenous rights,

We have walked almost 60 kilometres in one day to meet the *pradhaan* [Chief Minister] so that he listened to us once. We didn't meet him but some people joined us! Others asked us why we were making a noise; we said who else will if we have to save our jungles, you don't.

Pratham who was inspired by the readings held at the literary festivals and an advocate for 'tribal texts' noted,

I went with 2-3 NGO members to meet the Officer. We suggested bringing scholars to Singbhum. I said we should have someone read our stories and poems on the radio so all Sabar could listen and learn. They listened to us, got money for a 3-day programme. . . but no radio happened as they left [was transferred].

The Hill Sabar CYP's political agency has been rendered invisible by the dominant society and institutions, and their political voice remains largely absent from dominant imaginaries. The findings, however, demonstrate their innate sense of civic duty, democratic capacity and political agency, which call for further research. While their agentic enactments and political priorities were not always fully realised, the CYP have engaged with and, where necessary, resisted the hegemonic or oppressive structures. Thus, children's political agency, here, as Mohanty (2003: 83) notes, is 'figured in the small, day-to-day practices and struggles' whereby their politics emerge from a rethought sociality that practices 'remembering against the grain of "public" or hegemonic history' and 'asserts knowledge that is outside the parameters of the dominant'.

(De-)bordering agency

Children's agency has become a ubiquitous construct, even a paradigm (James and Prout, 1997), driven by universalist, rights-based frameworks, agenda and discourse (Tisdall and Kay, 2015). Increasingly, scholars have acknowledged its rather narrow conceptualisation centred on the child as an actor in their own lives, 'free will' or 'choice-making' subjects, 'in the here-and-now', which in turn de-historicises and de-socialises children whilst simultaneously fetishising agency (Durham, 2008, Esser et al., 2016; Spyrou et al., 2018). The article's focus has been to emphasise the ways in which Hill Sabar children and young people exercise, negotiate and adapt agency across a myriad of arenas including (but not limited to) their familial, social, historical, institutional and political contexts. Thus, agency exhibits a liminality, in moving across, within and through the bordered spaces of dominant imaginings towards a collective consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987). This (re-)articulates the tensions emerging from the under-theorisation (Abebe, 2019) of children's agency that disregard, distort or invisibilise the diverse contexts and fluid conditions within which peripheralised children enact it.

Findings presented reveal how within ‘collectivist’ communities, the CYP often enact their agency in intergenerational, relational, reciprocal and situated ways, which lie in contrast to the modernist or western notions of children’s agency that border and contain it within the individual, human or private realms. The study underscores the distinct ways in which the Hill Sabar CYP push against the binarised boundaries of independent-dependent, capable-incompetent, individual-communal or human-non-human. These include instances of their participation and decision making in everyday and sociocultural practices, education, environmental agendas, local politics and research, itself, alongside resistance to dominant norms and structures. Their agency then is often founded in their moral, ethical, familial and social responsibility – or what Barad (2007) refers to as onto-ethico-epistemology – that sit beyond individual choices, priorities and selfhood (see also Esser et al., 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013; Wyness, 2013). Even when their voices remained largely unheard and their sociopolitical agency unrecognised by the dominant world, Hill Sabar CYP demonstrated an acute sense of duty towards their wider communities and local-regional agendas. The Hill Sabar CYP’s insights reaffirm that agency cannot be ‘conceptualised a priori, true of all settings’ rather it is always located within its historical and sociocultural competencies, resources and accumulations (Oswell, 2013: 129). Furthermore, despite the oppressive, hegemonic thinking confronted, they have maintained their agentic, ‘self-assured position’ (Simpson, 2016: 331) in collectively refusing normativity. These lie in contrast to the moral project of childhood (Cook, 2017) devising the capable, autonomous and responsible child, agentic in their capacity to act individually whilst simultaneously catering to capitalist neoliberal agendas and modes of governance (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, 2013).

Given the data and discussions, this article observes the bordering of agency to occur across four key planes: (a) the ideological – say, neoliberal-collectivist, individual versus the intergenerational and relational; (b) onto-epistemological, that is the situated nature, status and social reproduction of childhoods within a particular frame; emphasising/diminishing adult-child binaries; (c) pragmatic – founded on ‘capacity’ or markets; privileging particular ‘choosing subjects’ and (d) conceptual – theorisations and research focussed primarily on the individual child as a social actor; obfuscates children’s intergenerational, relational and reciprocal agentic enactments, across their historical, temporal, material or sociopolitical landscapes. While borders may ‘suggest both containment and safety’, to avail a more expansive understanding of agency, those engaged with children’s lives must pay attention to the ‘fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment’ borders represent to transcend them (Mohanty, 2003: 1–2). Subsequently, children’s varying contexts, beyond the social, become significant to any analysis of children’s agency.

In contrast, edges or peripheries that the Hill Sabar CYP inhabit function as connections between two adjoining areas (Lynch, 1960) enabling agency to work through contradictions and the logic of opposition (Anzaldúa, 1987). Accordingly, the CYP’s agency is intricately enmeshed with their dynamic planes of ‘being’ – whether the material, discursive, spatial, institutional, political or ecological – moving fluidly from the self to the community. This is significant to understanding how children transitioning between places, people or non-human entities may enact their agency in diverse, contradictory and interconnected ways that disrupt adult imaginaries. Their agency is also aligned temporally with oral wisdom, belief systems, historical knowledges, and everyday and ritualistic practices transmitted and adopted, intergenerationally. Such inseparability of different forms, planes and places of agency demonstrates how Hill Sabar CYP de-border agency in embracing its heterogeneity, ambiguities and incompleteness (see Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Durham, 2000; Kontovourki and Theodorou, 2018; Oswell, 2013). Thus, Hill Sabar CYP paint a more complex picture of agency, which, at once, highlights the onto-epistemological dissonance between indigenous-dominant thinking, and constrains of bordering agency. In response, the paper calls for

a de-bordering of children's agency to unfold, blur and perhaps 'free' the concept (Durham, 2008) from its bounded framings. De-bordering agency, it proposes, would enable a shift from dominant constructions to reflect the assemblages espoused by the Hill Sabar CYP, build transdisciplinary knowledge and further research. This, it argues, offers the emancipatory potential for crossing boundaries, decolonising agency and interrogating its potential fetishisation (Spyrou et al., 2018). In turn, it accords adults with the responsibility to (re-)turn their gaze and (re-)articulate the conceptual, philosophical and political implications of what it means to be an agentic child in the Twenty-first Century and beyond.

Concluding thoughts

As evidenced, Hill Sabar CYP's agency is distinct from the 'western', neoliberal constructions of agency. This begs the questions: Whose and what forms of agency matter(s)? Are renderings of agency entrenched in bourgeois hegemony, the state and its modes of governance or proclamations of those privileged enough to research and write about childhoods? Or is it children's agency, *for* and *by* them? Are we able to 'turn' the adult/dominant gaze to 'see' children as active agents across the myriad sites they inhabit, and the matter of children's agency, critically and seriously? Such reflections call for a de-bordering of agency, which may offer radical sites for decentring it. Accordingly, the paper urges an analysis of the assemblages of agency that children embrace to actively negotiate and navigate their lives. Noting assemblages, at once, pronounces the borders that frame children's agency and the messiness of in-betweenness, diminishes distortions of hierarchical knowledge-making and offers insights from diverse sites that may enrich the 'new wave' of childhoods (Kraftl and Horton, 2018). Ultimately, these may allow those interested in children's 'best interests' to alleviate the moral project of childhood and traverse the politics of fear about 'imagined others' (Ahmed, 2003) with that of hope, whereby children may (re)design *their* worlds (Spyrou, 2022).

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Notes

1. The article recognises the imaginary yet historically, politically and epistemologically-laden nature of these boundaries that, at once, dichotomise thus invisibilise the distinct colonial, conceptual or sociomaterial difference observed within southern nations, and position it as the empirical rather than an epistemic 'other' (see further analysis in Abebe et al., 2022; Connell, 2007; Santos, 2015; Takayama, 2016).
2. For instance, nowhere was this more visible than the well-intentioned yet decontextualised response to educational inequalities prioritised by the Education for All scheme. Whilst considered a 'fantastic feat' in enrolling 90% of the world's children into schools, set in dominant agendas rather than locally relevant solutions, it failed those most vulnerable and marginalised children (Benavot, 2016: 8).
3. Research envisioned as a process, and not a linear progression of inquiry, entailed three stages: *construction* (to explore indigenous meaning-making; prior knowledge), *deconstruction* (say, breaching experiments or analysis of everyday and aesthetic activities) and *reconstruction* (participatory activities for reconceptualisation of constructs). This enabled the researcher and 'researched' to partake in reflexive knowledge-making, design tools together and diminish power binaries. For detailed understanding, please see Sinha (2016).

4. It navigated the gargantuan nature of ethics through devising three broad strategies, namely, 'paradigmatic' and 'situated' ethics, and the 'ethics of reciprocity' to confront power binaries and the blurring boundaries of insider-outsider and 'knower-knowing subject'. Examples of processes employed included rewriting the *self* (see Freeman, 1993); reciprocity whether in bringing in a doctor to offer medical services or taking the Sabar Chiefs to speak to the Deputy Commissioner (for detailed discussions, see Sinha, 2017).
5. This article acknowledges that India is a vast country with varied historical, sociocultural, material, geographical and discursive contexts thus any such monolithic assumptions about an 'Indian' or 'indigenous Indian' childhood will remain insufficient in its analysis and understanding.
6. There are over 705 distinct tribal communities that vary significantly in terms of their histories, sociocultural practices, linguistics, geographies or economic status.
7. The Lokur Committee, set up in the 1960s, recommended five criteria for identification of Scheduled Tribes: (1) primitive traits (2) distinct culture, (3) geographical isolation, (4) shyness of contact and (5) backwardness. The Hill Sabar are officially categorised as 'particularly vulnerable tribal group'. The author acknowledges the pejorative connotations of some of these criteria and debates on the definition of an indigenous community.
8. For instance, see the Government of India (2011), International Institute for Population Sciences (2022), or Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2018), none of which include the Hill Sabar.
9. For some examples, see the various Chipko movements (Shiva, 1988) or the protests by indigenous communities for the settlement of rights and claims at the Kuldiha-Nilgiri and Sunabeda (Odisha) sanctuaries, against their displacement from centralised state-administered wildlife protected areas (Ray, 2021).
10. See, for instance, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2011, 2019) that note the need for enhancing tribal engagement with health provisioning and care. It is also important to note that not a single mother, adult or child in the six hamlets had been visited by medical practitioners, given the governments programmes for mobile and village Medical Health Centres, as per the National Rural Health Mission (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2005).
11. See for instance, *The Global Gender Gap Report* (World Economic Forum, 2024) which situates India 129th of 146 countries on indicators related to economic independence, participation, political empowerment and educational attainment; the Pew Research Centre's (2022) findings on Indian attitudes to gender roles reporting nearly nine-in-ten Indians (87%) agreed that 'a wife must always obey her husband', or the National Family Health Survey, 2019–2021, whereby 44% men agreed with reasons for 'wife-beating'. Also, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2021) records saw a 15.3% increase in registered cases of crime against women, in 2021.

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Dr. Pallawi Sinha is a Senior Lecturer in Childhood Studies and Education at the University of Suffolk. She is a trained educationist, social scientist, and product designer. Pallawi completed her PGCE in 2009 at the University of Essex and obtained her Master's degree in 2012 and a doctorate in 2016 at the University of Cambridge. As a southern scholar, her pedagogical and research interests have been shaped by and respond to the socioeconomic, educational, and political disparities, dominant ideologies, and knowledge hierarchies that shape children's lives. For the past fifteen years, Pallawi has sought to build knowledge in the fields of education and childhood studies, focusing on indigenous, marginalized, and disadvantaged childhoods; the history, philosophy, politics, and sociology of childhoods and education; ethics and politics of research; early childhood care and education; 'theory-making' from the peripheries; qualitative, contextually-relevant, and responsive research; community-driven and arts-based methods; place-making, arts, creativities in education, and 'othered' epistemologies.