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Looking Beyond the Present: The Historical Dynamics of Adivasi (Indigenous and Tribal) Assertions in India

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Abstract

This essay is organized into two parts that describe some of the important conceptual, historical and representational issues that relate to Adivasi assertion. The first part, 'Adivasis' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples', summarizes the key conceptual and semantic debates that have enabled Adivasis to assert themselves as Indigenous peoples internationally and nationally. This paves the way for a fuller engagement with the topic of Reinterpreting Adivasi History. Here I reflect upon a statement made about 'looking beyond the present' by Shibu Soren, a leading Santal politician, to question how and why movements led by Adivasi freedom-fighters sustain discourses of indigeneity in postcolonial India. The second part, on the ICITP (Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples), links up the previous strands, to assess how this indigenist organization has developed a reading of Indigenous rights as relating to history, in a range of representational contexts.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, a self-styled Indigenous movement has emerged in India that strengthens the political will and broadens the historical consciousness of many subaltern and marginal communities. Made up of national, regional, district level and grass-roots organisations, this movement seeks to empower 'Adivasis' - a term translated as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' - in relation to the federation of states that rule throughout India.¹ The economic imperatives of globalisation, leading to the liberalisation of India's markets, have generated immense pressures on the social and physical resources of the nation to alter the political dynamic between the states and the subordinate groups. This dynamic is creating amongst Adivasis 'new forms of agency and subjectivity', which are activated via counter-narratives of community identification

¹ 'Adivasi' means 'first dweller' or 'original inhabitant' in Hindi. In this paper I retain its capital 'A', to resonate with other Indigenous texts, and do not italicise the word in an effort to normalise its use. It implicitly refers to a plural social body, yet to retain clarity I pluralise it as Adivasis whilst referring to specific social collectives. Whilst some writers refer to the Adivasi in such contexts, this is too suggestive of a cultural homogeneity which does not exist.

(Sinha 2003).² Whereas the ruling states represent the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples as 'Others' - beyond the pale of civilisation and requiring development projects to uplift them as 'Scheduled Tribes' - recent scholarship has re-evaluated Adivasi histories, questioning the collusions and collisions between colonial anthropology and postcolonial discourses of identity and development (The most notable recent academic monographs on Adivasi history are Hardiman 1987; Sundar 1997; Skaria 1999). Informed by the various trajectories of Subaltern historiography, itself a field that re-interpreted Adivasi insurgency in nineteenth-century India to sustain a critique of both colonial historiography and national elitism, these texts enable readers to comprehend how histories of anti-colonial resistance regain efficacy in contemporary Adivasi identifications and assertions (see Guha 1983 on subaltern consciousness as evident in the *Santal* rebellion and Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan*; Samaddar 1998 on the interpenetration of popular memory and the politics of identity).

Comprising almost 10% of India's billion strong population and residing in every state, Adivasis have only recently represented themselves as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples', in the international forum (Mullik *et al.* 1993). Therefore a new global consciousness is developing amongst Adivasis that is prepared to challenge the Indian states in relation to core issues: notably rights to *jal, jangal, jamin* (water, forest, land), as well as to Indigenous histories, languages, educations, and more democratic forms of governance.³ It would be misleading to suggest that the globalisation of indigeneity, witnessed for example in the form of the United Nations Decade for Indigenous Peoples (1994-2004), has ushered in a wholly new political awareness amongst Adivasis (see Karlsson 2003: 403-23) for a critique of Adivasi participation in the United Nations indigenous forums). This is because Adivasis have participated in and led numerous struggles against colonial and postcolonial oppression in many regions of India, enabling their limited rights (as Scheduled Tribes) to be ratified and enshrined in the Constitution of India (see Nayak 1996 for a vibrant analysis of the 'dominant discourses' that have sought to contain Adivasi assertions). Rather, a new phase of the Indigenous movement has emerged, in which the universal language of rights has been internalised (from the perspective of Adivasis) and internationalised (from the perspective of the nation-state), generating unprecedented tensions between Adivasis and the state governments (see Hansen and Stepputat 2001 for a wider theorisation of modernity, state hegemony and ethnic mobilisation).

Once the domain of an ideological battle between colonialists wishing to protect 'Aboriginals' from national development, and Hindu nationalists pushing towards cultural homogenisation, it is Adivasi activists who are now taking charge of the idea of indigeneity, and reappraising its relevance and usefulness in an era of ongoing, or neo-,

² See also Rajni Kothari's inaugural speech at Workshop on India's New Economic Policy, organised by Setu: Centre for Social Knowledge and Action and Minority Rights Group (London) at New Delhi, 6-9 April 1998, http://www.minorityrights.org/WorkshopReports/work_rep_chapterdetail.asp, accessed on 12.07.2004.

³ The notion of *Panchayati Raj* (rule of village councils) is at the centre of these assertions (See Dreze and Sen 2002: 358-70).

or internal-colonialism.⁴ In states such as Jharkhand (Koel-Karo dams), Madhya Pradesh (Forest rights), Orissa (Kashipur aluminium mining), Andhra Pradesh (Birla Periclase project) and Kerala (Wayanad wildlife sanctuary) etc., the coercion of the federal governments against those Adivasis protesting against the injustices of development exemplifies how Adivasis are frequently brutalised, criminalised and marginalised in the political, legal and economic discourses of the postcolonial nation.⁵ The new indigenist discourse enables Adivasis to contest these processes and discourses, as it provides an inter-national system for the resolution of sub-national grievances. By reworking the concept of indigeneity across federal states and between postcolonial nations, Adivasi activists disrupt the familiar dichotomies deployed in the field of development: notably 'the global' vs. 'the local', 'the state' vs. 'the people', and 'the modern' vs. 'the traditional' (Mosse 2003 describes how Orientalist binaries reappear in postcolonial development models). Once confining indigenous groups to an eternity of subordination as 'traditional native communities', these dualities have been unhinged via the new international indigenism. This movement that finds pathways of emancipation in references to:

i) inscribed places and a politics of location, which oppose coercive governmental practices and divisive administrative boundaries.

ii) modern and post-modern collectivities, which oppose colonial and communalist notions of primordial identities,⁷ and

iii) subaltern pasts and memories, which sustain minority histories to oppose the silencing and misappropriation of indigenous liberation/revolution narratives (Chakrabarty 2004) argues how shared pasts translate into politicised histories through their reinterpretation, collectivisation and re-dissemination). As such the new indigenist discourse poses epistemological challenges to social scientists, anthropologists and historians who, whilst reconsidering their own conceptual baggage, can generate new understandings of the political and cultural dynamics of Adivasi activism, to critique the social and academic inequities that mar decolonisation (Sundar 2000).

Supported by the ideology of Adivasi Self Rule, Adivasi assertions gain vitality and national prominence by linking histories of anti-colonial resistance to the discourse of the international Indigenous movement, concerned with Human rights, Cultural rights, Minority rights and Gender rights.⁸ Assuming new forms and working in multiple

⁴ Interestingly (Nayak 1996) widens the scope of 'Indigenous Peoples' in the Indian context to encompass Adivasis, *Dalits* (Oppressed, Scheduled Castes) and Other Backward Castes, a practice that resonates with the idea of 'politics unlimited', (see Chakrabarty 2006).

⁵ See on Jharkhand (Akhilesh and Pathak 2002; Bhatia 2001); on Madhya Pradesh (Raina 2001) on Orissa (Krishna 2005) on Andhra Pradesh (Pragada 1998) on Kerala see (Raman 2004; Krishnakumar 2001; Krishnakumar 2004).

⁶ The movement for Adivasi autonomy in Jharkhand, eastern India exemplifies these dynamics (Basu 1994)

⁷ The political vis-à-vis ethnographic or primordial construction of ethnic groups is well articulated by (Mundu 2002) for wider indigenous perspectives see (Sissons 2005).

⁸ See (Cowan 2001) for a concise history of the interpenetration of rights and culture in international law; on the Constitutional rights of Adivasis see Girish Patel, 'Liberalisation and Adivasis' Rights', minorityrights.org as cited above; gender is becoming increasingly prominent in Adivasi studies, see (Xaxa

trajectories, the presence of Adivasi history sustains the political consciousness of indigenous, as well as non-indigenous leftist communities throughout India and beyond.⁹ In India, the discourses of internationalism, sub-nationalism, regionalism and sub-regionalism, decentralisation, *Panchayati Raj* (village governance), Tribal Customary Law, environmentalism etc. have all been informed to a large degree by Adivasi interventions in modern political processes.¹⁰ Whilst the Constitution of India denies Adivasi claims to indigenous status amongst those classified as Scheduled Tribes, the new international indigenism actively asserts group ownership of resources and collective identities, an idea which usually retains legitimacy and authority only in areas outside the scope of the state (Bijoy 2003). In India today, the routine abuse of land rights and cultural rights conferred to Adivasis leads to heightened claims for various forms of decentralised governance, as well as to the emergence of new forms of resistance, new dynamics of power between state and civil society, and new interpretations of subaltern pasts.

This paper is organised into three sections, that trace some of the important conceptual, historical and representational issues that relate to Adivasi assertion. The first part, Adivasis as ‘Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’, summarises the key conceptual and semantic debates that have enabled Adivasis to assert themselves as indigenous internationally and nationally. The second part, Reinterpreting Adivasi History, reflects upon a statement made about anti-colonial pasts by a leading Santal politician (the term Santal refers to the third largest of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in India) to assess how and why movements led by Adivasi freedom fighters sustain discourses of indigeneity in postcolonial India. The final part, on the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, links up the previous two sections, to assess how this prominent indigenist organisation develops the notion of Indigenous rights relating to history, in a range of representational contexts.

‘Adivasis’ as ‘Indigenous and Tribal Peoples’

The conceptualisation and dissemination of Adivasi identities and histories prompts a range of intellectual and political projects, notably the re-interpretation of Adivasi histories, and the re-assertion of Adivasi rights through fluid local, regional, zonal, national, and international discourses. At the outset, the meaning and history of the term ‘Adivasi’, especially when related to the ‘Indigenous Peoples’ movement, requires some careful analysis. Adivasi representatives translate the term ‘Adivasi’ as ‘Indigenous and

2004) and Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, ‘Impact of New Economic Policy on Adivasi Women’, minorityrights.org as cited above.

⁹ The advocacy of Adivasi rights by non-indigenous writers may be one of the movement’s defining characteristics, suggesting the long history of Adivasi/non-Adivasi cultural interaction and pointing to the regionalist undercurrents in contemporary leftist discourse. Mahasweta Devi is a prominent author whose activism and literary creativity responds to these historical and political dynamics (Arya 1998).

¹⁰ Whereas the Indigenous presence in the early 1990s was accommodated into the national mainstream via environmentalism (Sen 1992), the ecological assumptions about Adivasis and the attendant notions of timelessness are beginning to be dismantled in favour of more politicised readings of Adivasi culture (Baviskar 1997).

Tribal Peoples' in the international forums, in an attempt to allow Adivasis to engage with the discourse of indigenism on their own terms, i.e. their specific historical, cultural and political experiences of being tribal and/or indigenous (Burman 1998). On account of the fact that the concept of 'Indigenous Peoples' is now upheld in international law, and that the global collective of 'Indigenous Peoples' now has a foothold in the inter-governmental development process, group identification as 'indigenous' is becoming an increasingly contentious issue in South Asian nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) (Kingsbury 1995: Bose 2003). As outlined by R.H. Barnes the new constellation of 'Indigenous Peoples' challenges dominant state-centric notions of group identity: '[Indigenous Peoples] is a political category whose definition is in the making, and it will probably change (Barnes 1995: Introduction 1-12). The pertinent issues for group identification as indigenous include:

- i) the international variability of definitions of 'Indigenous Peoples' (a situation that provides space for further indigenous assertion),¹¹
- ii) the open relationship between ethnic identification and claims to 'historical priority', leading to contests over spatial and temporal belonging (in the fallout from the colonial demarcation of cultural terrains and identities),
- iii) the processes of self-determination, and related demands for resource ownership and environmental protection,
- iv) the negotiation of political inequity in both colonial and postcolonial eras (Barnes 1995: 3).

Once voiceless/insurgent communities have regrouped to present themselves to the nation-state as minority 'peoples' i.e. distinct communities with advanced moral and legal claims to regional lands, national citizenship and international rights (Bhengra *et al* 2005). These claims unravel many assumptions that have been written into many ethnographic and administrative texts, such as those describing India's 'tribals', a heterogeneous community (in both cultural and political terms) that encompasses mainland Adivasis, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, ethnic minorities and in-migrating 'tea tribals' of Northeast India, and the first inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.¹² As noted by Crispin Bates, these 'tribals' are often the subjected to prejudice in mainstream national imaginary, prompting the case for a new political identification as Adivasis (Bates 1995: 103-19). Whereas some sociologists demand scientific proof of indigeneity and question the validity of the Adivasi claims (notably Beteille 2005: 19-33), scholars who are familiar with the anti-colonial resistance movements and postcolonial identity-politics generally support the Adivasi assertions as 'Indigenous Peoples'. Although the notion of indigeneity can only be realistically proven at the regional - as opposed to the wider national - level in India, an Adivasi/Indigenous consciousness has been generated through shared experiences of colonisation and anti-colonial resistance, and through the distinctiveness of non-Hindu societal values and

¹¹ (Chakrabarty 2005) analyses the global negotiation, contestation and appropriation of the term 'Indigenous Peoples' as a productive postmodern/postcolonial strategy.

¹² For further information on Denotified tribes see 'Mahasweta Devi', a documentary film by Shashwati Talukdar on the Bengali activist/writer (2001); on Northeast India see (Singh 1982: vol. I) and (Rustomji 1983); on Adivasi diaspora in Northeast India see (Pullopillil 1999).

political systems (Xaxa 1999: 3589-3595 presents arguments for and against tribal indigeneity).

Organisations such as the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, or Bharatiya Adivasi Sangamam, are the current flag-bearers of the Indigenous movement in India. Although the representativeness of ICITP as an Adivasi organisation has been called into question - its network covers all of India, but it is led by activists from the state of Jharkhand - its construction of a community of 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' both a) resonates in India's federal states where the rights of Scheduled Tribes are ignored, and b) challenges the narrowness of existing definitions of 'Indigenous Peoples' in inter-governmental discourse, which tend to privilege the colonial encounter, over pre-colonial encounters, in the production of indigeneity (Karlsson 2003: 407-408; Karlsson and Subba, 2005: 1-19 'Introduction').

The translation of 'Adivasi' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' is in itself a strategic move. For indigenous discourse in South Asia, the racial binary produced in narratives of white conquest versus black native populations (inscribed in Euro-centric approaches to the Indigenous movement) is largely irrelevant. This is because it does not distinguish between the historical experiences of heterogeneous populations, such as between Adivasis and non-Adivasis in India. As channelled in the ICITP discourse, for example, an Adivasi identity refers to the multiple histories of resistance to and/or negotiation of the discourses and practices of marginalisation by the dominant groups in India, whether they be Hindu feudalists, Moghul governors, British colonials or Indian nationalists (Bates 1995: 105-109; Xaxa 1999: 3591). In these contexts, neither the term 'indigenous' nor the term 'tribal' adequately encompasses the complexity of Adivasi subjectivity, creating a need for conceptual hybridity and pluralism. Hence the construction of 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' as a phraseology that disrupts the global hegemony of the term 'Indigenous Peoples', and internationalises Adivasis in political spaces that both uphold and challenge the national apparatus of 'Scheduled Tribes'. By working between regional, national and international discourses of identity and development, the concepts of 'Adivasi'/'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' can be understood as analytical features of 'regional modernities'. As defined by Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal such analytics enable discourses of decolonisation and narratives of development to be conceptualised, reproduced and negotiated by both subaltern and state actors (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003: 1-61).

The term 'peoples' corresponds directly to the political collectivisation of minority ethnic groups, making both the singular term 'people' and the less contentious term 'populations' redundant (Burman 1998: 1-20). Derived from colonial anthropological literature, and replete with elitist notions of divisions between tribal and Hindu societies, the term 'tribal' has been re-cast in postcolonial South Asian anthropology and is still preferred to 'Adivasis' in the mainstream media and development discourses (Xaxa 1999: 3589-3590). This is because, in its perpetuation of cultural (as opposed to political) identification, it preserves the hegemony of the culturalist imaginary of the postcolonial nation. The administrative homology of the term 'tribal' is Scheduled Tribe (or 'ST'), which links 461 supposedly distinct minority ethnic groups, such as the Bhils of western India, Gonds of central India, Santals and Mundas of central-eastern India etc, on account of their shared cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis the mainstream populations (Xaxa 1999:

3589; on Bhil movements see Mathur 1988). The construct of ‘Scheduled Tribe’ was formalised in the tribal policies that the Congress government implemented in the years following Independence (Singh 1989). These policies revolved around affirmative action for the *anusuchit janajati* (STs), the protection of *anusuchit kshetra* (Scheduled Area), the authority of the Tribes Advisory Council and the representativeness of the federal state Legislative Assemblies (Munda 2002). The notion of ‘Scheduled Tribe’, however, privileges a spatialisation of groups in particular states or regions, and does not adequately denote indigeneity in national terms. This is because members of STs may only be considered ‘indigenous’ to particular states. If displacement and rehabilitation into a different state occurs, persons may lose their identification and rights as Scheduled Tribes. The concept of indigeneity therefore remains partial in the national Constitution, giving the non-Adivasi elites opportunity to further manipulate, abuse and negate the system of Scheduling.¹³

Premised on anthropological tropes such as locality, contiguity, and difference, the mainstream discourses of tribal provinciality and social inferiority are increasingly being superseded by Adivasi analytics of self-determination, i.e. decentralised regional autonomy, and Adivasi Self Rule (Savyasaachi 1998). Elaborating new politico-cultural tenets (minority status, linguistic diversity, cultural hybridity and performativity), the mobilisation of Adivasis around the idea of self-determination aims to provide the indigenous and tribal peoples with an equitable stake in the processes of development and globalisation. Although the Scheduled Tribe construct has provided a pivotal space for Adivasi self-identification, it usually features in current Adivasi discourse as a target of criticism, as federal states fail to fulfil their civic responsibilities in relation to the Constitution. The issue of indigenous self-determination causes much angst amongst both national elites, who are not willing to ratify the updated Convention 169 issued by the International Labour Organisation in 1989 that emphasises the rights of indigenous peoples to govern themselves, and state bureaucrats who have grown accustomed to the (mis)management of the Fifth Schedule, which defines ‘Scheduled Areas’ (Munda 2002).

Starting life as a Hindi term derived from Sanskrit (i.e. a non-Adivasi language), the notion of *Adi* (first, original) *Vasi* (dwellers, inhabitants) has sustained indigenous discourse in India since the 1930s. Taking a couple of decades since then to enter, alongside ‘tribals’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’, into the lingua-franca of postcolonial India, it is still underused, especially considering that overtly derogatory terms are still routinely applied to those groups marginalised by the Hindu caste system, notably *Vanavasi* or forest dweller. However, terms such as *Kaliparaj* - black people, used in colonial-era Gujarat for example, are no longer used in public or administrative discourse.¹⁴ Whereas critics of indigenous discourse see in the term Adivasi a trace of colonial-era protectionism, and a prolonging of social prejudice in the guise of cultural differentiation (Bates 1995: 117), it would be unlikely that the term would now carry so much weight in the indigenous movement unless it resonated with the ideologies of both indigenism and anti-colonialism. Similarly the idea of it being somehow ‘imposed’ on Adivasis, either

¹³ This issue was debated at length at the Tribal Solidarity Groups meeting, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi on 31 July, 2004. The non-Scheduled status of diasporic Santals in Assam in a case in point.

¹⁴ The concept of *Vanavasi* is used by the right-wing religious nationalists to de-legitimise *Adivasi* claims to indigeneity, see Munda 2002. For further colonial-era terms see Hardiman 1987: 13-17.

‘from outside’ or ‘from above’ (Xaxa 1999: 3595) similarly negates the agency of those who first invented and disseminated the term, and its relevance to the hundred million people it now unites to in the postcolonial era.

Originating in the Hindi language in the 1930s, a period of intense conceptual and practical decolonisation, the word ‘Adivasi’ can be assessed as both a translation and a negotiation of the term ‘Aboriginal’. This was a colonial category employed to delineate the conceptual boundaries between Hindus and non-Hindus and thereby undermine attempts to construct a homogenous national identity. The 1931 colonial census writers, for example, re-deployed the notion of aboriginality by emphasising ‘Aboriginal’ religions and languages as categories that could help sustain protectionist policies in areas dominated by this particular demography, such as the Chhota Nagpur region of Jharkhand (Lacey 1933: 262-277, 288-290). An ethno-centric colonial logic stated that ethnic identity for ‘Aboriginals’ would hold sway, in the midst of their increasing multilingualism and conversion to dominant religions. Thus ‘Aboriginality’, as a concept could be reinforced as an elite device to manage the shifting patterns of modernity in India. The census found that the majority of Adivasis spoke in regional languages besides their mother-tongue (such as Bengali, Hindi, Oriya) but still classed as Santali-speakers or *Mundari*-speakers those that belonged to Santal or Munda ethnic groups by birth (Lacey 1933: 240). Likewise, the primordial logic of ‘Aboriginality’ in the 1931 census denied modernity to the categories of religion. Whereas ‘non-Aboriginals’ who had converted to Christianity or Hinduism became members of these socio-religious groupings, ‘Aboriginal’ converts remained defined as Santal or Munda etc. (Lacey 1933: 248). On account of the political capital that could be earned through the de-tribalisation of the so-called ‘Aboriginals’, majoritarian nationalists - who demanded a homogenous, primarily Hindu, national community free from colonial divisiveness - dismissed the idea of ‘Aboriginality’ as little more than a colonial construct preferring to assimilate Adivasis as ‘backward Hindus’.¹⁵ However, during this early phase of national decolonisation, Adivasis internalised the idea of being an Indian national yet different from the majority, by means of

- i) having an indigenous or pre-Hindu ancestry,
- ii) belonging to societies organised through a tribal or non-hierarchical, organic and democratic constitution, and
- iii) aspiring to a realisation of long-held views regarding inter-community coexistence and anti-imperialist politics. (See Singh 1982: ix-xvi for a demonstration of how early Adivasi discourse and early postcolonial anthropological discourse propel similar ideas of tribal identity and assertion).

The pioneering indigenous peoples’ collectives were based in Chhotanagpur (now Jharkhand), a once mineral-rich and forested area that the colonialists administered, on account of the administrative memory of the indigenous assertions, in a different way to other divisions in former Bengal, such as Bihar and Orissa (see Mullik 2003, iv-xvii for a useful introduction to Jharkhand, and the Indigenous movement of the region). Becoming

¹⁵ (Ghuyre 1963: 3-4) addresses the colonial politicisation of the 1931 census. He develops phrase the ‘backward Hindus’ (Ghuyre 1963: 19). For further discussion see Hardiman 1987: 13; Baviskar 1997:103.

politicised through the many Christian missions in the area, the leaders of the Adivasi Mahasabha (Great Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples) first disseminated the notion of Adivasi as a political construct, demanding equal status in the political process and particular cultural rights (Singh 1982: 1-29). These demands corresponded closely to the new laws (notably the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act and the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act) that were implemented in the wake of the *Hul* (revolutionary liberation movement) led by Santal Adivasis in 1855-56 and the *Ulgulan* (revolutionary autonomy movement) led by Birsa Munda in 1896-1900 (Mullik 2003: 244-71). Although some commentators see a paradox in the fact that the claiming of Adivasi rights and identities relates closely to processes that are seemingly non-Adivasi, namely colonial modernity and national modernity, it is precisely this negotiation and strategic internalisation of the key concepts of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism - such as indigeneity, difference, and dissent - that should stimulate our critical analyses. Otherwise, Adivasi history will be marred by impossible demands for cultural and political authenticity, which belie the formation of Adivasi identities and discourses through the colonial and postcolonial eras.

To summarise, the translation 'Adivasi' as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' generates scope for further contests vis-à-vis both nation-state and regional state, as it re-locates Adivasi subjectivity outside the confines of colonial anthropology and postcolonial administration and within inter-governmental forums and inter-regional networks.¹⁶ By emphasising the need for an interpretation of 'Indigenous Peoples' that resonates in India - in view of both an Adivasi constituency and the national constitution - the strategic mobilisation of Adivasis as 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' expands the international scope of an already global discourse. Using Rajni Kothari's terms, such a mobilisation bridges the discourses of 'movements', 'dissent' and 'alienation', and establishes new critical terrains upon which Adivasis engage with the discourses of 'policy' and 'ideology' in the relevant regions (see Kothari 1997: 38-54 for the analysis of the relationship between these discourses).

Reinterpreting Adivasi History

In admiration of the spirit of resistance that has come to define the role of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the history of the Republic of India, Shibu Soren claims that: 'We fighting tribals look back to our legendary heroes - Tilka Manjhi, Sido [Murmu], Kanhu [Murmu], Birsa Munda - for inspiration. Their capacity to look beyond the then 'present' of things, and their dauntless spirit along with their love for the land has kept us ticking even in moments of agony and defeat.'¹⁷ Speaking as the leader of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM, Jharkhand Liberation Front), which is a prominent regional party in central/eastern India, Soren commands high respect in the new State of Jharkhand, formed in 2000 after seventy years of Adivasi assertion. Having gained political prominence in the mid-1970s when he led a mass movement to assert Adivasi land rights, Soren elaborates the revolutionary legacy of his fellow Santals, Sido Murmu and Kanhu Murmu - the leaders of the famous *Hul* that was fought against the East India

¹⁶ For a fuller theorisation of indigenous rights and self-determination in the context of globalisation, see the chapter on '(Anti)Globalization from Below', in (Neizen 2004: 57-81).

¹⁷ Shibu Soren in conversation with Shachi Arya (28 September 1991), in (Arya 1998: 208-15).

Company and their agents of exploitation in 1855-56 (on the JMM see Panchbhai 1982: 31-52; on revolutionary struggles and memories of the *Santal Hul*, see Duyker 1987). Soren continues to fight for mainstream recognition of Adivasi participation in India's freedom movement, by propelling his reader/listener into a history of Adivasi claims to self-governance that is being suppressed in postcolonial India. He speaks of the '...then 'present' of things...', a reference to the emerging colonial policies and capitalist economies that were resisted, in the late eighteenth, the mid- and late-nineteenth century, by Tilka, Sido/Kanhu and Birsa respectively (on the Birsa Movement see Rycroft 2004: 53-68; on the colonial suppression of the Santal rebellion see Rycroft 2006). Brutally crushed, these anti-imperialist movements continue to inspire Adivasi assertions in contemporary India, suggesting that even with national independence, the aspirations of the rural indigenous communities have remained unfulfilled.¹⁸ Such movements have been previously interpreted as:

- i) local ethnic 'insurrections', in colonial historiography,
- ii) proto-nationalist awakenings, in national historiography,
- iii) 'millenarian' or religious movements, in postcolonial historiography, and
- iv) examples of 'subaltern' consciousness, in leftist historiography (Guha 1983; the notion of tribal millenarianism or messianism is put forward by Fuchs 1965).

It may now be pertinent to respond to Adivasi reinterpretations of their pasts, to analyse how Adivasi Self Rule has assumed importance in debates about nationhood and democracy in postcolonial India. Unsurprisingly, each of these historiographic approaches foreground the ideologies of the dominant class, notably: a) 'race' and counter-insurgency, b) nationality and elitism, c) leadership and community identity, and d) state responses to insurgency or mass mobilisation.¹⁹ In Adivasi reinterpretations of these movements narrative closure is less conspicuous, as new meanings are recovered through collective memories and memorial practices, and as new readings of dominant narratives find their way into Adivasi political imaginaries.²⁰

In the view of Shibu Soren, the historic leaders of Jharkhand shared a visionary capacity that could comprehend and act upon the interests of the marginal Adivasis and their fellow agrarian workers. During prolonged campaigns of counter-insurgency these leaders and their followers were captured, imprisoned and often executed publicly by the colonialist police. Such scenarios prompt a questioning of how these movements have retained their vitality and political viability in the midst of collective trauma, forced migration and multiple phases of subordination. The descendents of those closely associated with the movements were often forced to forget their insurgent pasts, fearing of state retribution.²¹ Yet each of these movements engendered shifts in colonial policy,

¹⁸ This idea is expressed by Rup Chand Murmu, 7th generation descendent of Chunu Murmu (Sido and Kanhu's father), in the documentary film, 'Hul Sengel: The Spirit of the Santal Revolution', dir. Rycroft and Tudu (ICITP and University of Sussex), 2005.

¹⁹ I cover many of these issues in Rycroft 2006.

²⁰ For example, see John Jantu Soren's drama *Sengel Dak* (Raining Fire), which was included in the film *Hul Sengel* and subverts the historical novel by Robert Carstairs, *Harma's Village*, Pokhuria: Santal Mission Press, 1935.

²¹ See my discussion of Bitiya Hembram in the next section.

pointing to their partial success in creating a discourse of indigenous power and mobility that could be reworked by Adivasi representatives and activists in later decades. These issues can be approached by taking on board recent methodological shifts in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Applied Anthropology and Subaltern Historiography. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, has set out numerous ways to pursue an indigenous research project, incorporating the reclamation of indigenous pasts, testimonies, stories and memories (Smith 1999: 143-146). Many of these projects overlap with newly established 'Southern', post-colonial, feminist and Fourth World approaches to history that have emerged in the 'new humanities' over the past two decades (Chatterjee and Ghosh 2002; Nayak 1997).

Challenging disinterested scholarship, the identity-politics that these approaches address can also generate negative responses amongst reactionary state institutions, leading to complications in the role of postcolonial academicians. Positioning herself as a researcher straddling the domains of academic inquiry and political activism, Nandini Sundar has recently detailed how an applied anthropology in India can critique the historical tendency amongst politicians and activists to essentialise group identities, whilst redressing power inequities between scholarly and civic agencies (Sundar 2000). In her excellent analysis of collective memory amongst Santals, Prathama Banerjee demonstrates how Adivasis who survived the colonial suppression of the *Hul* kept its radical temporality alive via their own speech and songs (Banerjee 2002: 242-73). By recollecting the *Hul* as an alternative future, which allowed indigenous as opposed to colonial ideologies to thrive, these Santals contested conventional ways of interpreting the past and of writing history.

Whereas Banerjee is concerned primarily with strategies of memory in the colonial-era, the writing of Adivasi consciousness must also confront the workings of modernity in the postcolonial state, from its origins in the developmental state as espoused by the Congress Party (the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty), to the more recent states of communalism as produced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (see Kothari 1997: 44-45 for a discussion of Adivasi movements and federalism in the context of Gandhian ideology). In the context of the ultra-Right wing nationalism that the BJP has fostered throughout the 1990s, the very notion of a minority or Adivasi identity (i.e. being non-Hindu or Indigenous/Tribal) has been undermined by a Hindu-centric conception of India's population. The BJP has strengthened the nexus between state bureaucrats, nationalist politicians, multinational industrialists, and district police, which is a trend that has come to characterise the economy of India in the era of liberalised markets from the point of view of non-elite Adivasis (Rao 1996). Shibu Soren's recollection of '...moments of agony and defeat...' gain a renewed relevance since they were spoken in 1991, his words becoming entangled in the political realities that define indigenous identity in India today as the BJP has gained control in many Adivasi-dominated districts (Joshi 1999; Chatterji 2004).

Shibu Soren's glorification of Tilka, Sido, Kanhu, and Birsa, manifests what Stuart Corbridge has termed 'ethno-regionalism', or the building of a political agenda around 'the ideology of tribal society' in the postcolonial era (Corbridge 2003). The idea of Adivasi autonomy in central-eastern India has revolved around the reorganisation of four federal states, namely Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, to include a fifth,

Jharkhand, and a sixth, Chhatisgarh. Although devolution has since occurred - Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh were both inaugurated in 2000 - only the borders of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh states were affected, with Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh emerging after their bifurcation. Much to Shibu Soren's annoyance, and having previously widened his party's programme to incorporate the interests of the non-indigenous workers, at the time of reckoning the glory of devolving Jharkhand fell ironically to the BJP. Although the notion of a Jharkhand state first gained popularity amongst urbanised Adivasis in the 1930s, via the work of Jaipal Singh, the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Jharkhand Party, the Congress party curtailed any moves towards Adivasi-oriented decentralisation in the 1960s by breaking intra-party consensus (Singh 1982: 8). New organisations, such as the Sido Kanhu Baisi (Committee), kept the ideology of the Jharkhand movement alive by commemorating the Hul and by probing the elitist bias of national parties (Panchbai 1982: 36-38). The Hul Jharkhand Party (the Revolutionary Jharkhand Party, which also recalled the spirit of the Santal rebellion) and the JMM were formed in the 'ethno-regionalist' climate of the 1970s, again bringing the idea of Jharkhand statehood into the national mainstream, to such an extent that its implementation became a significant bargaining tool between the regionalist and nationalist parties (Singh 1982: 9).

Located within this political genealogy, Shibu Soren's words can be interpreted as both an assertion of Adivasi ideology and as a critique of colonial and national modernities in India. Beginning his career as a son of a murdered agrarian worker he consciously styled himself as an Adivasi revolutionary in the 1970s during the movement to harvest forcibly the produce of expropriated Santal lands (Panchbhai 1982: 44-48). He has since become known as *guruji* (respected leader) amongst tribal and non-tribal constituencies in Jharkhand. Whilst his Adivasi critics claim that in pandering to regional elites he has diluted the ideology of tribal society, he is generally perceived in the national mainstream to be the embodiment of sub-nationalist assertion. Presenting the ideologies of regionalism and indigenism to the people, like his fellow JMM parliamentarians he lives and works amidst a host of emerging and contradictory political dynamics, which lend themselves to an interpretation beyond the new boundaries of Jharkhand. Whilst the ongoing violation of Adivasi and workers rights in Jharkhand is evident for example in the routine abuse of both migrant female miners in mineral-rich urban areas and bonded labourers in rural locations, as well as the federal state's encroachment upon Adivasi lands, the implementation of Jharkhandi statehood has not equated with Adivasi autonomy in any practical or meaningful way.²² Having appropriated the idea of Jharkhand regionalism, the agents of state nationalism have continued to ignore the cultural rights of non-elite Adivasis, a condition that is reflected in many of the Indian states (On social exploitation and cultural assertion in Jharkhand see Mathew Areeparampil 1995 and Mathew Areeparampil 2002). Thus the Adivasi movement in India now assumes an inter-regional dynamic, which aims to draw together the demands of Adivasis in various states to strengthen the presence of indigenous representation in the national political forums.

²² Many of these issues are elaborated in Participatory Research in Asia, *Tribal Land Rights and Industrial Accountability: case of mining in Dumka, Jharkhand*, New Delhi: SPRIA, 2004.

The regional demands are often closely related vis-à-vis the anti-democratic actions of Indian states. These include the deliberate oversight of the rights enshrined in the Constitution pertaining to the ownership and non-transferability of Adivasi lands in locations defined since Independence as 'Scheduled Areas', forcible displacement of Adivasi inhabitants of villages targeted by mineral extraction corporations, criminalisation of Adivasi activists protesting against state development projects, the mismanagement of state funds earmarked for Adivasi welfare, the denial of Adivasi access to forest produce by petty officials, etc (Bijoy 2002: Janu 2003). These violations are supported by a global geopolitical apparatus that purports to represent national interests yet increasingly sustains a vision of modernisation that actively marginalises the commitment to the democratic process of Indigenous Peoples worldwide. Representatives of Adivasi interests in India are negotiating this situation by lobbying for Adivasi autonomy and self-determination within the general parameters of the national Constitution and via the legal and political framework of federal states. By pursuing the avenue of decentralisation, the proponents of Adivasi Self Rule have much support from the Leftist bloc, as both indigenous and Marxist/Maoist ideologies also seek to dismantle the hegemony of communal parties and of inter-governmental development projects (Rao 1996; Kothari 1997). Throughout the 1990s a new political culture has emerged that supports committed solidarities between non-governmental organisations, Adivasi activists and communities, regional and leftist parties, and civil rights actors. In this milieu, campaigners for *Panchayati Raj* (Village Councils) aim to reawaken the longstanding ideal of democratic governance in South Asia by mediating authority between the Indian state and the physical and social resources of any particular area (Dreze and Sen 2002: 358-70). Since the colonial period, some of the areas dominated by Adivasis have been administered as Scheduled Areas, under the 5th Schedule of the Constitution. As these are often rich in mineral resources, state governments have been unwilling to implement Panchayati Raj in them. A pan-regional movement led by Adivasi activists helped to usher in the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act in 1996, commonly known as PESA, although in states such as Jharkhand, the Rightist governments are stalling the act to appropriate more Adivasi lands (Sawaiyan 2002).

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(to be continued)

Assertion of Political Identity: the Ho Adivasis of Singhbhum 1770-1859

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Abstract

The story of resistance and rebellion by the Ho adivasis of Kolhan in erstwhile Singhbhum district of Bihar has for some decades been studied under the broad rubric of anti-British uprisings. These writings more or less foregrounded adivasi struggles as negating colonial rule, rather than emphasising identity assertion as the positive trigger. Moreover, there is not much attempt to critically examine colonial records, on which these reconstructions were largely based, to expose the hegemonic mentality, which conducted the erasure of the indigenes. This essay seeks to underline their assertion, over the territory they inhabited. This is premised on the very consciousness of agency or a maker, rather than subjecthood and marginalisation, stimulating them either to resist any bid to encroach into it or rebel when alien rule was imposed on them.

The paper is divided in three broad sections. After exploring the fructification of Ho agency in the first, the second portrays the story of resistance and rebellion by progressively narrating Ho resistance to feudal expansion: 1770-1800, to local chiefs and the English in 1820-21, to feudal rule and British expansion 1830-37 and Civil Rebellion of the Hos during 1857-59. Summing up the deliberations, the last highlights how this assertion may be identified as the pre-history of Jharkhand movement.

Introduction

The story of resistance and rebellion by the Ho *adivasis* of Kolhan in erstwhile Singhbhum district of Bihar has for some decades been studied under the broad rubric of anti-British uprisings (Datta 1957: 66-67; Singh 1978; Sahu 1985; Bhadra 1990: 257-63; Das Gupta 2007: 96-119; Sen 2008; Chaudhary 2008: 83-105; Sen 2010: 15-27; Sen 2011: 82-96). Large part of this historiography, being the product of either the centenary or 150th year celebration of the Great Revolt of 1857, carried forward the post-independence scholarly agenda of rewriting pan-Indian or regional discourse of anti-colonial struggle (Majumdar 1962: 196-99; Jha 1964; Singh 1966; Baskey 1982). Decolonisation of episteme necessarily underlined the vulnerability or marginalisation¹ of the indigenes at the hands of the British and their Indian henchmen. So these writings

¹ They were generally considered geographically, culturally and politically marginal. Inhabiting the hilly and forested tracts, their territories were identified as border zones; being supposedly savage and uncivilized, they were deemed culturally marginal; they were politically marginal as their territories were conquered by powerful dominant forces.

more or less projected adivasi struggles as negating colonial rule, rather than emphasising identity assertion as the affirmative trigger. Moreover, there is not much attempt to critically examine colonial records, on which these reconstructions were largely based, to expose the hegemonic mentality, which conducted the emasculation of the indigenes. This essay seeks to underline their assertion (Munda and Bosu Mullick 2003) over the territory they inhabited. But this assertion, I argue, has not always been done from their position as a marginalised and oppressed community. This is premised on the very consciousness of agency or a maker, rather than subjecthood and marginalisation.

Emphasising marginality, rather than agency, is more or less born out of an ethnocentric mindset (Guha 2002: 4-12). This castigated adivasis as inferior people, who belonged to a pre-civilised, pre-state and pre-literate order. In early colonial documents, the Hos are repeatedly called 'wild inhabitants' or rash and foolhardy 'savage',² whose dare devilry on the battlefield³ was considered animal-like and not human.⁴ They were then identified as pre-state people for their 'constitution of confederate village communities' or republics, without a centralised government (Baden Powell 1972: 153; Dalton 1973: 178).⁵ Moreover, as they spoke a dialect of Munda origin and had not then developed their own script, the Hos were classified as a pre-literate people.⁶ These marks of backwardness motivated the British ethnographer-administrators to club them as an insignificant people, who did not deserve the epistemic focus accorded to the antonymic group of societies.

Accompanied with this was the colonial and elitist reading of the past by the colonial ethnographer-administrators as well as a section of post-colonial scholars. In colonial ethnography, British generals, administrators and the feudal elements hogged the limelight. Adivasis were configured as a faceless aggregate, representing a certain number, bereft of any agency and self-motivation. The last made them ascribe tribal movements either to have been instigated (infamous conspiracy theory) or they fought for others and did not have their own cause to defend (Das Gupta 2007: 110-11). Unfortunately, a section of post-colonial writings continue to argue almost in the same line, when they observe that colonial records were produced and preserved to serve British administration rather than to reconstruct histories, and that the colonial ethnography denied the tribe much space or downgraded them because they were

² E. Roughsedge, Agent to the Governor General, to Lt. Col. James Nicol, Adjutant General, 31 March 1820, paras. 2, 4, 30, No. 109, Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 15 April 1820, OIOC; E. Roughsedge to C. T. Metcalfe, Secretary to the Government, 9 May 1820, para.11, SWFPDR, 20 April 1820 to 7 June 1821, Vol.27, BSA.

³ Roughsedge wrote 'these savages with a degree of rashness and foolhardiness which scarcely credible met the charge of the troop, half way in open plain battle axe in hand.' Roughsedge to Nicol, para. 4.

⁴ Roughsedge to Metcalfe, para. 3-4, 12, 17. BSA.

⁵ Challenging this thesis of pre-statelessness a recent study remarks that the 'state system of the Singhbhum Raj had over time entrenched itself in the countryside'. But the author at the same time admits that Porahat Raj had systematically dwindled because of the creation of Seraikela and Kharsawan estates, more so because of Ho resistance (Das Gupta 2007: 100-4).

⁶ In fact, after the formation of the Ho-dominated parts of Singhbhum into a separate administrative unit called the Kolhan Government Estate, Lt. S. R. Tickell, undertook researches on the structure of Ho language (Tickell 1840).

supposedly low people.⁷ This mentality brings two broad issues to the forefront: first, whether adivasis were makers of their destiny; and next, whether they were really the lowest people, deserving denial or down grading. This makes the agency and centrality, rather than marginality, as the basic premise for evaluating adivasi anti-British struggles.

The paper is divided in three broad sections. After exploring the fructification of Ho agency in the first, the second portrays the story of resistance and rebellion by progressively narrating Ho resistance to feudal expansion: 1770-1800, to local chiefs and the English in 1820-21, to feudal rule and British expansion 1830-37 and Civil Rebellion of the Hos during 1857-59. Summing up the deliberations, the last highlights how this assertion may be identified as the pre-history of Jharkhand movement and also a critical phase in anti-colonial movement in India.

The Ho as an agent: Fructification of Honess and Hodesum

The portrayal of agency will put forth two arguments: to identify the creative phase in Ho history as a counterpoint to marginality; second, their capability to act as a conscious tool of history. We learn that the groups of Munda community, who migrated from Chotanagpur plateau into Singhbhum, gradually mustered strength as their numbers swelled; defeated the Bhuiyans and Saraks, who ruled over large parts of Singhbhum and finally colonised over its southern parts. Known as *Larka* (fighting) *Kols*, they were so dreaded that travellers did not venture to enter their territory. They emerged as a challenge to the chiefs of Porahat, Mayurbhanj, Seraikela and Kharsawan, who sought Larka military help in their contest for supremacy over Singhbhum. By the beginning of the 19th century AD, the Hos, therefore, were at the centre, rather than in the margin of Singhbhum geo-polity.

Another significant development had been the growing territorial sensibility among the Hos around this political space, which they cherished as their *Ho-desum*, more so, as their folklore relates, their *Nirul disum* (sacred land) (Sen 2008: 115-16). They laid the basis of their material culture by clearing the forests to found their villages and prepare arable lands. This caused their shift from hunting and foraging to a foraging-hunting-cultivating socio-economy. A village for them was a material and moral space, as locating their *Jahira* for their *Desauli* (village deity), the *sasans* (burial place), where their sire-sires rested and a village *Deori* (priest), who mediated into their sacerdotal affairs. In sum, *Ho-desum* was the place where their culture evolved over centuries and they came to acquire the distinct identity as the Ho. Roughsedge therefore found them 'distinct from the great Hindoo family both in manners, language, religion and appearance'.⁸ Their 'numerous and well inhabited villages',⁹ 'the singular spectacle of well-cultivated...country studded with large villages',¹⁰ 'villages abounding in sheep,

⁷ This was precisely the response to my essay contesting the marginalisation of Ho adivasis of Singhbhum in the rebellion of 1857-59. To quote: 'Isn't it only to be expected that the British would deny or downgrade the agency of tribal people, who in their eyes held the lowest position in the grade of humanity?'

⁸ Extract Political Letter from Bengal, 9 May 1823, para.157, F4, 800/21438, Bengal Political Department, Operations against the Coles in Singboom. (OIOC)

⁹ Roughsedge to Metcalfe, 9 May 1820. para. 15, 29

¹⁰ Ibid., para.17.

goats, fowls and pigs’,¹¹ ‘village administration through the *Mundas* and *Mankis*’,¹² and prevalence of monogamy and marriage when both sexes attained puberty¹³ evidenced their agency and a civilised way of life. They therefore did not merit downgrading and erasure, which feature colonial ethnography. The next section visits the historiography of Ho resistance and rebellion both to underline epistemic denial and how this can be contested.

The story of Resistance and Rebellion

It is relevant at the outset to usher the feudal and imperialist elements, against which indigenous struggle was fought. Feudal forces comprised the Porahat dynasty, who proclaimed themselves as the raja of Singhbhum, though this estate dwindled after its bifurcation into Seraikela and Kharsawan states in 1620 AD (Paty 2002: Chapt. 2). There was moreover the raja of Mayurbhanj, who controlled over the four Ho *pirs* in south eastern Singhbhum. Emergence of the Ho as a strong political counterpoise to the local chiefs¹⁴ jeopardised the power balance in the whole region. This set the backdrop for the Ho resistance to the attacks on Ho territory by the rajas of Chotanagpur and Singhbhum and chief of Bamanghatty during 1770-1800. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, the East India Company became interested in Singhbhum to promote the political and commercial interest for which they combined with the local chiefs. In this backdrop, the Ho resistance and rebellion occurred, as elaborated below, during 1770-1859.

Ho resistance to feudal expansion: 1770-1800

First was the united expedition launched by Drupnath Sahi, the raja of Chotanagpur, and the chief of Porahat with twenty thousand forces. The Larkas successfully quelled the attack and ‘drove the Nagpur men with immense slaughter.’ With ‘almost an equal force’, the second under Jagannath Singh of Porahat was repulsed when ‘many hundred, were killed and died of thirst, in a pursuit which lasted for the space of ten miles, until they had got out of Lurka Cole.’ The third by the zamindar of Bamanghatty, though ‘of a partial and local description’, ‘was completely defeated and (he) lost so many men, that he has cautiously cultivated their good graces ever since.’ The cumulative impact of these successes, it was admitted, ‘had taken away from the Rajah of Singboom and all the neighbouring zemindars all inclinations to molest the Lurkas on their own ground.’¹⁵ Understandably, these proved a defining moment in Singhbhum polity, virtually catapulting the Ho to the political ascendancy over the region. It is true that Roughsedge had only folklore and memory to draw on, as the second event collated from an eye witness showed, but he seemed to have neither the leisure nor inclination to collate further information, particularly on organisation, leadership and logistics of resistance.

¹¹ Ibid., para. 18.

¹² Ibid., para. 19.

¹³ Ibid., para. 21.

¹⁴ They not only virtually put an end to Porahat rule from south Kolhan, but also reduced its control only over 500 out of a total of 14000 villages in Singhbhum (McPherson 1906: 18).

¹⁵ Roughsedge to Metcalfe, 9 May 1820, paras.16-17.

This historical milestone in popular struggle therefore remained condensed into a few lines.

The Hos fight local chiefs and the English: 1820-21

The chiefs and the English had their own axes to grind. The former¹⁶ needed British military support to recover large swathes of land from the Hos. The English interest was palpably expansionist. The English East India Company first came into contact with Singhbhum after their expedition to Dhalbhum in 1773. But when they acquired Cuttack and Sambalpur, after the victory in the third Anglo-Maratha war (1818), their design was to connect its eastern empire with its western possessions through this district. They moreover wanted to safeguard their trade interests, which smuggling of salt supposedly encouraged by the raja of Singhbhum, jeopardised. Coalition of interests led to signing of agreements in January and February 1820 between the English and rulers of Seraikela, Kharsawan and Porahat. Accordingly, the chiefs agreed to pay annual tribute with the expectation that the English would militarily help them in regaining control over the Ho.¹⁷ E. Roughsedge initially declined to concede. But the growing complaint about the Larka raids and unsafety of the roads and molestation of travellers by them compelled him to change his strategy.¹⁸ It is pertinent to observe that the raids were not conducted simply for accumulating booty, but were rather indigenous ploy to vindicate their political superiority.

During 1820-21, the Hos were therefore forced into an armed fight with their enemy. As the commander of a combined military expedition, E. Roughsedge adopted both the policy of conciliation and conflict. He was successful in conciliating several Mundas of Ajaudhia and Rajabassa, who accepted from him presents of *pugries* (turban) and clothes and agreed to pay *malguzari* (rent) to the raja of Porahat. Virtually unopposed, Roughsedge then moved into Gumla *pir*, misconstruing that both village heads and villagers had reconciled to the new order of things. But actually this was their ploy to allow the enemies to advance to a vantage point before making surprise attack. Armed with their traditional weapons of bow, arrow and axe, an unspecified number of Larkas mounted an open attack on the British camp at Chaibasa, in which one British soldier was killed and two were seriously injured. Though they lost between forty and fifty of their men, which forced them to beat an immediate retreat to the fastness of the hills, they soon retaliated by killing a grass cutter, who supplied fodder to British horse, disrupted British supplies and communications and carried off a 'dak' despatch. But heavy casualties reduced them to a desperate situation. This forced heads of twenty four villages to submit to local chiefs. Roughsedge then moved into Satbantari *pir* and then Jayantgarh, the former seat-hold of the raja of Porahat. Here the British faced the most turbulent and uncompromising band of insurgents belonging to Barndia, Khairpat and Gomaria. Their ranks swelled when several villages of the above *pirs* and those of Thai *pir* joined hands.

¹⁶ Porahat rajas were also interested in regaining control over the chiefs of Seraikela and Kharasawan as well as recovering goddess Pauri, their tutelary deity, from Seraikela.

¹⁷ Extract Political Letter from Bengal, 13 June 1823, para.185, F4, 800/21438, Bengal Political Department, Operations against the Coles in Singboom. (OIOC)

¹⁸ Ibid., para.157, Ibid.

They compelled Babu Narain Singh, the agent of Porahat, and Raghunath Bisee, the *killedar* of Jayantgarh, to flee their charges for safety. They destroyed Jayantgarh village and targeted all those villages, which had submitted to the British. The British had to requisition a contingent of one hundred *barkandazes* under *subedar* Bahuran Singh, who was finally able to subdue the insurgents. Their task became easier because of open clashes between the conciliatory and refractory groups.¹⁹

Peace continued to be an open question. A fresh round of insurgency broke out in Gumla *pir*. Though colonial records ascribed this to the intrigue of Ghasi Singh,²⁰ the former landlord of Gumla *pir*, more pressing factors were the forcible seizure of goats, fowls etc. by Bahuran Singh's men and maltreatment with the daughter of Khandu Patar, an important Ho resident of the area. Fifteen hundred men of Gumla *pir* and Barndia attacked the British forces stationed there. Gripped with panic, Bahuran Singh retreated to Seraikela. But the Larkas killed the subedar, fifteen of his men and twenty horses and looted their entire cash and arms. They also occupied the mud fort at Chainpur where Ratan Singh, the *jamadar* of barkandazes, had taken refuge and captured the entire cash, arms and ammunitions. These reverses, coupled with extensive raids and destruction of Porahat territory by the Larkas, so terrorised the chiefs of Porahat, Seraikela and Kharsawan that they urged Roughsedge to come to their rescue. Though Roughsedge was wary of initiating an immediate armed offensive, it was under the behest of none other than Lord Hastings, the Governor General of India, Lt. Colonel Richards led a massive and an all round offensive, in which the British forces moved from Sambalpur, Cuttack, Midnapur and Bankura, at the end of March 1821. Against superior number and ammunitions, indomitable courage and bravery and traditional weapons of the insurgents were obviously no match. The heavy loss in men and material and fear of British reprisal finally prevailed on the Mundas of different Ho pirs to tender their submission to the British in May 1821. They agreed to remain loyal and obedient to their chiefs; pay a rent of eight *annas* per working plough for next five years, keep the roads free and safe for travellers and promised not to indulge on pillage and plunder and offer literate learning to their children either through Oriya or Hindi.²¹

The Hos no doubt exhibited extraordinary courage and mobilised an armed collective resistance, which the British in India found a rather extraordinary experience. But one is forced to comment that the chroniclers represented them merely as a faceless aggregate, not caring to explore the logistics of insurgency, leadership and motivation. Despite these facts, one cannot also ignore some fundamental limitations in Ho struggle. First, lacking a central command, their offensives were more or less area-centric, apparently led by their local leadership; the level of militancy was not uniform, which showed that pirs like Ajaudhia and Rajabassa were less militant compared to Gumla, Satbantari and Jayantgarh; and lastly, they were not only divided into pro and anti-British/feudal

¹⁹ Roughsedge to Lt. Col. James Nicol, Adjutant General, 31 March 1820, paras.2-12; Roughsedge to Metcalfe, 9 May 1820, paras. 20-8.

²⁰ Major Roughsedge, Agent to the Governor General to Mr. Secretary Swinton, 17 February 1821, para.2, Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 10 March 1821, F/4, 800/21438, op.cit;

²¹ Extract Political Letter from Bengal, 13 June 1823, paras. 179-85, Ibid (Sahu 1985: 30-7; Sen 2008: 35-40).

factions but they indulged in internecine squabbles that impacted on their insurgency. These chinks widened as time progressed.

Ho collective protests against feudal rule and British expansion: 1830-32

Even though the Hos suffered defeat and accepted feudal rule, within years they regrouped to throw off alien rule. Fortunately, colonial ethnography provides some information about their leadership and method of organising a collective resistance. The first of these protests occurred in Jayantgarh, Aula and Lalgah pirs in south Kolhan in 1830. Colonial records underlined the conspiracy of Raja Achet Singh of Porahat and Raju Mahapater as the principal cause. Actually the system of payment of regular rent to Ragnath Bisee, chief of Jayantgarh pir and Madh Das Mahapater of Bamanghatty, illegal exactions by Ragnath and the death of Suban Munda under suspicious circumstances caused popular anger to erupt into an open popular uprising. The leadership was provided by Nakia, Buria and Jubal, the disgruntled sons of Suban, as well as Mata Munda of Barndia. They mobilised several villages of Lalgah and Aula pirs with the aim of killing Ragnath. Armed insurgents destroyed two of his villages, pillaged Jayntgarh and looted cattle and other materials. Out of fear, Ragnath fled to Keonjhar with his family. But after the peaceful overtures of Jamadar Sahib Singh and some respectable men, sent by Achet Singh, the insurgents could be conciliated to pay *malguzari* at the stipulated rate to the chiefs in April 1830 (Sahu 1985: 40-45).

The next outbreak, in which the Hos were partially involved, was the famous Kol Rebellion of Chotanagpur in 1831-32 (Jha 1987). Though the causes that disaffected the people of Chotanagpur were not relevant for the Hos of Singhbhum, some of the villagers of Kolhan and Porahat joined the Mundas out of a fellow-feeling. This rebellion again informs tribal mode of mobilisation and the leadership. First was the circulation of the arrows of war in tribal villages as a clarion call to take up arms against the enemies. Next was the supposed beating of drums to assemble villagers. This apparently was the strategy of garnering support, which Bindrai, Singrai, Khandu Pater, Bahadur and Sooe of Kol Rebellion had adopted to assemble villagers of Sonapur, Tamar and Bandgaon at Lankah in Tamar. The insurgents from Kolhan strengthened the ranks of Chotanagpur rebels, who unleashed an unprecedented retaliation and revenge on the oppressors. This provided the logic for the British to abandon their policy of surrogate imperialism and embark on the policy of conquest (Sahu 1985: 47-50).

The British military assault and the Ho resistance: 1836-37

The British were convinced that the Larka Koles were a 'dreadful pest to the civilised part of Singboom, and to all the adjacent zemindars' and a stumbling block to improvement. They should therefore be taught the lessons of peaceful and disciplined living. This patent civilising mission however velvet-gloved the claws of imperialism. Their real motives may be adduced from this quote:

The Governor feels it to matter of reproach that within a distance of not 150 Miles from Calcutta upon the line of road almost the most important in the Empire the Country should yet be unknown and unexplored and stand *as blank upon our Maps* (italics mine) as the least accessible parts of the interior of Assin & that all we know of it is that from time to time bands

of savages mostly armed with bows and arrows make predatory incursions from it upon our peaceful subjects and those of the Countries dependent on us....it seems to be our duty and our interest whenever it can be done without too much hazard of life and of expense to endeavour to gain strength by *drawing within the pale of law and good order* (italics mine) every Country within our extensive frontier which like those of the Coles and the Konds not only for themselves set all Government at defiance but by extending beyond their borders a feeling of insecurity²² and alarm *check all industry and improvement* (italics mine) in the neighbouring Districts.

This imperialist design was understandably antithetical to the freedom-loving Hos who had time and again shown that exotic control was abhorring to them. This set the stage for British armed attack and Ho insurgency to resist it.

Deployment of two companies of British army under Capt. Wilkinson and Capt. Corfield and the Ramgarh Battalion under Capt. Lawrence, helped by the forces of Kunwar Ajambar Singh, chief of Seraikela and Chaitan Singh of Kharsawan, clearly showed how high the British rated the Hos as an enemy. But unfortunately, the Hos presented a divided house. Being loyal to the British, a section of them openly helped the enemies, while, apprehending British retaliation and reprisal, some of the Mankis and Mundas of Thai and Bharbharia pirs, succumbed to the peaceful overtures of Wilkinson. In fact, Wilkinson's conciliatory policy was backed by the ruthless policy of destruction and pillage. Though eight villages of Aula pir and some more of Bharbharia pir put up dour resistance, they could not resist the onslaught of ruthless and revengeful British army. Before the advancing British army, several village heads of Lalgarrh pir surrendered. Wilkinson was successful in apprehending many insurgents from their hideouts, besides recovering several buffaloes plundered earlier from Keonjhar. Consequently, the combined attack of the British and local chiefs, which began at the end of 1836, succeeded by February 1837 in bringing a total number of twenty six pirs, comprising 622 villages under British control. These were formed into a separate administrative unit called the Kolhan Government Estate (KGE) (Sen 2008: 46-72; Sahu 1885: 71-81).

This tale of defeat and surrender was soon reversed when a fresh wave of insurgency broke out. Some leaders of Ho insurgency like Poto Sardar of Rajabassa, Barra and Debey of Barndia, Narra and Topoe of Buludia and Pandwa of Patta Dumuria were at large. They were joined by those, who had recently been released from Ranchi jail. They took multiple steps to garner support. First was presumably the high handed step of committing excesses and threat on villages loyal to the British. Second was the path of persuasion. The last was a novel method that introduced the messianic element in Ho armed struggle. Poto employed a Bhuiyan priest named Mangani Naik, of Barbil in Keonjhar district of Orissa, who issued charmed arrows to him for circulation around Ho country and distributed such charms as would render the wearer invulnerable and British guns innocuous.²³ The deployment of this religious symbol was the strategy to shed the lack, as related before, of a centralized command under a common leader, which had

²² R.D. Mangles to Captain Wilkinson, dt. 19th September 1836, para. 10. Extract Bengal Judicial Cons. No. 12 of 11 October 1836.

²³ *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for the British and Foreign India, China and Australia*, Vol. XXVI, New Series, May-August, 1838, London, 1838 (Singh 1971:149-53).

forced them earlier to fight the enemy at area levels under their own regional leaders. This joined Ho struggle with the well-known methodology of invoking divine sanction by Sidu, Kanu and Birsa in the struggles. These steps helped mobilising the support of several villages of Lalgarh, Aula and Bar pirs. Wilkinson was forced to reach Chaibasa in November 1837, accompanied by a contingent of 400 firelocks, 60 horsemen and 2 guns under Armstrong and Lt. Tickell, the assistant political agent of KGE, and 200 forces of Seraikela. This strong army moved to Seringsia ghat (pass) to confront Poto and his men. Though the Hos launched an attack on the enemies, the British apprehended some of his adherents, destroyed rebel booths at Seringsia, pillaged two of their villages, recovered some cattle and rice. By December, they could capture all the prominent rebel leaders including Poto, Bora, Narra and Pandwa, whom they put under summary trial and openly hanged to cast terror among the Hos. This was indeed a great example of martyrdom by the benighted indigenes of Singhbhum that enriched India's struggle for freedom.

Civil Rebellion of the Hos: 1857-59

After a peace for two decades, Kolhan-Porahat of Singhbhum resumed anti-British protest, along with other parts of India, during 1857-59. In colonial records this event features either as a sepoy mutiny or feudal struggle led by Arjun Singh, in which the indigenes played a minor role.²⁴

Inspired by an elitist mindset (Sen 2007: 167-78) some post-colonial works observe that the rebellion was triggered by raja's men; the Ho participation was not the act of their own volition, but a product of loyalty or instigation (Das Gupta 2007: 99). This mentality invests only the elites with consciousness and judgment, while it characterises subaltern action to be a purposeless one, driven by momentary impulse (Sen 2007: 169).

Singhbhum rebellion had three distinct phases. This began as a mutiny of the sepoys²⁵ of the Ramgarh battalion stationed at Chaibasa on 3 September 1857. This came to an end on 16 September 1857, when the combined forces of the British and the chief of Seraikela, comprising 3000 Hos, recaptured Chaibasa (Buckland 1902: 103). The next phase was the rebellion by Arjun Singh. He took evasive stand²⁶ to British overtures from Lt. Birch, the Senior Assistant Commissioner, Singhbhum, for co-operation and help. Meanwhile, during September-November 1857 his employees were busy fomenting anti-British uprising.²⁷ Apprehending that the raja was inciting the Hos to rebellion, Lt. Birch

²⁴ Letter of Lt. R. C. Birch, the Senior Assistant Commissioner, Singhbhum District to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, 6 October 1857, No. 40, SCPP; Letter from Officiating Commissioner of Manbhum and Singhbhum to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 29 December 1857, SCPP, from 1857 to 1862, no 31, BSA; Letter from E.T. Dalton, Commissioner of Chotanagpur to E.H. Lushington, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 30 September 1859, SCPP, no 224, BSA ; W. Gray, Secretary to the Government of India, Home department to W.S. Seton-Karr, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 18 April 1861, SCPP, no 759, BSA (Dalton 1973: 183-84; C.E. Buckland 1902: 98-109; Bradley-Birt 1903: 219-28).

²⁵ Dalton to Lushington, para.15; Officiating Commissioner of Manbhum and Singhbhum to the Secretary, para.7 (Buckland 1902: 103).

²⁶ Officiating Commissioner of Manbhum and Singhbhum to the Secretary, para. 14.

²⁷ It was proclamation at the Chaibasa bazaar that 'The people belong to the Almighty, the country belongs to the King and the ruler thereof is Maharajah Urjoon Singh.' Jogu Dewan directed a shopkeeper at

declared raja to be a rebel and captured Porahat.²⁸ Arjun Singh finally assumed the leadership of the widespread popular uprising²⁹ of the Hos of Kolhan and Porahat. Sources related that adivasis stood behind Arjun Singh because of 'immense influence that he and his brother are shown to have possessed.'³⁰ We learn that in response to the symbolic call through the circulation of the war arrows, several Mankis, Mundas (a Manki is the head of a pir i.e. cluster of villages and a Munda is the village head) and Ho villagers assembled at Ajaudhia, the seat of the raja, and solemnly swore to be loyal to him.³¹ Colonial records narrate that the Hos were loyal and disciplined adherents of the raja; they represented merely the force of a number; leaders were raja's brother Baijnath Singh, and Raghu Deo and Shyam Karan, two of his employees.³²

Official documents dilated that this participation at once converted the raja-led movement into a 'widespread upsurge of the various tribes of Singhbhum' (Buckland 1902: 105-6). With this the rebellion entered the third phase, the civil rebellion of the adivasis. Murder of a jamadar and two barkandazs at Jayantgarh in Bar pir, giving 'the signal for an outbreak in Southern Kolhan', the whole region was engulfed 'in open insurrection' that threatened Chaibasa, the district headquarters. Though the British force led by the special commissioner apprehended two minor rebel leaders, the Ho insurgents valiantly fought against the enemy at Mogra. As a result, the British force had to change their route of movement. But about 4000 arrow-clad Hos launched a fierce attack on them, resulting in the injury of every British official, including Capt. Hale and Lt. Birch. In the battle, 150 Hos and one Sikh soldier were killed, while about 26 of the latter seriously wounded. Undeterred by heavy loss of men, the insurgents chased the enemy for seven miles ignoring the gunshots fired by the withdrawing enemy. The British had no other way left but to requisition *shekhawati* battalion from Raniganj and an additional force of 100 European soldiers. Even then the rebels of Kolhan and Porahat continued their heroic fight till the British troops blocked all the routes of escape to hills and jungles. Arjun Singh and tribal insurgents were forced to surrender by February 1859.³³

Above details make three questions very relevant: what caused the Ho militancy, how this collective protest was organised or whether this was organised and led by their own men. A perceptive observer will discern that though the Hos had laid down arms and accepted British rule two decades ago, fire was smouldering within their hearts. This, as outlined in two recent papers (Sen 2007: 169; Sen 2011: 84) was the product of maladjustment with the new order of things. It is true that Kolhan adivasis did not suffer from land alienation or other forms of atrocities by the landlords and *mahajans*, which had driven the Santals to the *Hul*. Similarly, they did not face the problem of loss of land

Chaibasa to provide rations for ten thousand men. Twelve blacksmiths were employed at Porahat for making iron balls for raja's artillery. Letter of Birch to the Secretary, paras 4,9

²⁸ Dalton to Lushington, para.31; Officiating Commissioner of Manbhum and Singhbhum to the Secretary, paras. 9,14-7.

²⁹ Ibid., para.21.

³⁰ Dalton to Lushington, para.51.

³¹ Officiating Commissioner of Manbhum and Singhbhum to the Secretary, para.5.

³² Dalton to Lushington, paras.33-4 (Buckland 1902: 105-6).

³³ Dalton to Lushington, paras. 33-4 (Dalton 1973: 184); Gray to Seton-Karr, para. 18; (Buckland 1902: 105-6; Sur 1986: 28-62; Sahu 1985: 95).

and forest rights, which caused the *Ulgulan* (rebellion). In fact, the social ferment was the result of their failure to adjust with alien system of law and justice, which Wilkinson's criminal and civil rules had introduced. The court structure, the elaborate procedure of evidence and of filing cases, the use of Persian, Hindustani and Bengali etc. were complete strange for a people, who were glued so long to their traditional mode of orally administering justice at the village through their village elders and heads. Similarly, land revenue settlements by Lt. Tickell (1837) and Davis (1854) transferred the customary right of the village community over to the government. Assessment of rent on the basis of *hals* (ploughs) and regular payment of rent were anathemas for the people. With the fire rankling in their hearts, they formed a strategic alliance with Arjun Singh, the raja of Porahat.

Similarly, with a more perceptive and imaginative reading, it is perhaps not difficult to apprehend, as has been done in a recent essay (Sen 2007: 170-71) how this social protest was staged. To quote

The Ho communal solidarity grew around their affiliations to *killi*, *hatu* and *haga* (clan, village and brotherhood) that ensured their unity for a common cause. The area of unity could be extended from village to *pir* level and even beyond by holding their public meetings and the call of unity being messaged through the circulation of battle arrows and often by beating of drums. To respond to a common call was compulsory. Armed by their traditional weapons of battleaxe, bow and arrow the entire community could act as a social militia, converted into a dreaded military force often under their regional leaders.

This leadership was provided by another genre of source, which embodies indigenous leadership of Gono Pingua.³⁴ In his judgment of 9 March 1864 E.T. Dalton, Commissioner of Chotanagpore, identified Gono as 'the most active adherent of the ex-rajah of Porahat amongst Singhbhum or Larka Kols and the principal agent in spreading disaffection amongst them and the leader of the men of that tribe.'³⁵ Gono was the son of Mata. Mata was remembered to have fought the British in 1837; he was imprisoned and later he died there.³⁶ Gono was a literate man having studied at Chaibasa school. But due to poverty he left studies and took to 'evil' ways. But very likely his father's imprisonment and his brother's capital punishment for participating in the anti-British resistance of 1836-37 goaded him initially to accompany some Mundas and Mankis to Porahat, meet Arjun Singh and respond to his call to join the revolt.³⁷

It should not however be presumed that Gono's above decision was driven simply by any innate veneration and loyalty. He had his own motives, as the raja had his own. To those Mundas and Mankis, who had responded to the call of Arjun Singh, he implored: 'I have been hunted from Chuckerdhurpore and from Porahat and now obliged to live in the jungles. What will you do? Will you fight for me? We said we would fight and swore

³⁴ From Lieutenant-Colonel E.T.Dalton, Commissioner of Chota Nagpore to F.R.Cockerell, Officiating Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, No. 437, 15 March 1864, Judicial Department, Proceeding no.31, Judicial Department, May 1864. (West Bengal State Archives).

³⁵ Remarks by the Commissioner of Chota Nagpore on the trial of Gonoo, son of Mata, Judicial Department, Proceeding no.31.

³⁶ Ibid, Testimonies of Martun and Rainso.

³⁷ Ibid, Gonoo's Testimony.

to do so.³⁸ This exemplifies Arjun Singh's dependence on tribal support. Similarly, Gono needed the investiture to emerge as the legitimate central leader of Ho insurgency, which otherwise he could not because of sporadic and regional dimension of Ho rebellion. Instead of invoking religious intervention as done by Poto Sardar, Gono chose to assume central leadership through a trans-ethnic secular command. This was facilitated when Arjun Singh appointed him as his 'Sirdar in Singhbhum' and invested him with the '*tal-pat*' (palm leaf) letter, a turban and a horse. Gono and his followers, like Patan Goala and Gooda Manjhi, used this letter to mobilise villagers under him.³⁹

This investiture legitimized Gono's position as the acclaimed regional leader of ethnic revolt in south Kolhan. His name 'was not only in every body's mouth' but his writ ran across the entire region, which the Mankis, Mundas and villagers had to honour. Gono collected 100-armed Hos to assist Arjun Singh in Porahat. He then returned to Jayantgarh. Under his orders the murders of army-personnel were committed here. He went back to the raja and returned again to Kolhan to mobilize support for him. Insurgents looted the provisions sent from Chaibasa by the British, which Gono sent to the raja in bullock carts. He led Ho armed fight in the famous battles fought at Mogra and Seringsia. Though Gono declared himself to be the agent of the raja, he actually sported himself as the 'Chief of Singhbhum', riding the horse given to him by the raja himself.⁴⁰ For waging war against the Queen and for causing the death of a European, Gono Pingua was awarded life imprisonment u/s 121 and 302 IPC.

Conclusion

The above pages have thus been able to present the story of Ho assertion of political identity against neighbouring feudal elements and the British East India Company during 1820-59. This narrative critiques the elitist bias in colonial and post-colonial historiography that portrays the Hos as insignificant. It argues that their collective protests were not staged from their position of a vulnerable and marginalised people. Rather they were a key force in Singhbhum geo-polity, a status they earned through their raids and victories in the battle field. Triggered by an affirmative urge of preserving their distinct ethnic identity and territorial hold over Ho-desum, their cherished homeland, they resisted the military onslaughts of feudal and imperialist forces. Their power of organisation, military skill, extraordinary bravery and indigenous leadership turned them into a dreaded fighting community, who could be subdued only by superior number and weaponry. The narration, however, does not gloss over the cleavages among them that internally weakened their struggle. Despite this flaw, we have to admit that their

³⁸ Ibid, Gonoo's testimony.

³⁹ Martun deposed 'Gonoo had in his hand a tal-pat letter, which he said was an order from the ex-Rajah and asked if in obedience to it we would assemble a force and take up a portion of Juggernathpore or not.' Testimonies of Martun and Konka. Interestingly that a literate symbol be invoked by Gono to sway an oral society in his favour amply spoke of the impact of literacy reminiscent of Sidu and Kanu's application of the similar strategy during Santal *Hul*.

⁴⁰ Testimonies of Martun, Rainso, Chamroo, Konka and Remarks by the Commissioner of Chotanagpur.

consciousness and agency deserve focus and accolade, which a section of mainstream historians fails to acknowledge.

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Abbreviations: BSA -Bihar State Archives; CS - Craven Settlement; CT - Chakradharpur thana; DRRC – District Record Room Chaibasa; KR–*Khuntkatti* Records; KT- Kolhan thana; MT - Manoharpur thana; OIOC- Oriental and India Office Collections; SSCP - Spare Copies of Porahat Papers; TS - Tuckey Settlement; VN- Vasta No; WBSA – West Bengal State Archives.

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The Culture of Present: An Understanding of the Adivasi Aesthetics

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If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 6.4311.

Abstract

This paper seeks to comprehend the logic behind the carefree and easy-going temperament of the *Adivasis* of Jharkhand despite the hardships and limitations of their mundane life. The study argues that this is characteristic of their aesthetics which owes its root to a unique approach towards time that reflects in a present-centric attitude. It consists in thinking of present as real in a way in which the past and future are not. Though the term 'aesthetics' has a wider connotation, here this signifies value oriented artistic attitude towards life as reflected in the culture of a people. Further, since time is an important category for the understanding of the culture, the paper aims at studying temporality in the specific socio-cultural perspective only. It tries to underline the subjective meaning of temporality that the *Adivasis* of Jharkhand assign to it. Then it goes to study how in turn this attitude towards temporality affects their aesthetics resulting into the *culture of present*.

Introduction

A close study reveals that a carefree and easy-going temperament characterises the aesthetics of the *Adivasis* of Jharkhand. In spite of the hardships and limitations of their mundane life, they still retain their zeal and enthusiasm for a zestful life. This attitude has struck the ethnographers. D. N. Majumdar remarked 'The Ho boys and youths care more for *Dama*, *Dumang* and *Susung* (i.e. drums, dances and songs)¹ than for occupations which are expected to assist the family...The daily routine of a Ho young man from morning to late night may be summed up in the following sentence, eat, play, eat, play, eat and dance till the stars change their places and the darkness of the night fades into the twilight of morning' (Majumdar 1937: 82-83). S. C. Roy underlined the 'old racial light heartedness, carelessness and easy-going temperament' of the Oraons (Roy 1984: 246) and characterised Mundas of Chota Nagpur as 'Impulsive to a degree, strong in love as in hatred, with a keen sense of self- respect and an eye for the beautiful in Nature, ...

¹ However, Majumdar's literal translation is incorrect. While *Dama* is like a kettle-drum, *Dumang* or *Duman* means a drum beaten on the two sides. *Susun* or *Susung* means to dance. If the word songs is retained the exact Ho equivalent should have been *Duran* or *Durang*.

industrious and lazy by turns,... inordinately fond of drink, and improvident in the extreme' (Roy 1970: 292). Likewise, L.O. Skrefsrud mentioned that dancing, singing, drumming the dancing-drum and the kettle-drum, blowing the flute and the horn, playing the fiddle, folk- tales, stories and conundrums, hunting in the forest, catching fish, and beer drinking were important means to derive pleasure and joy and to forget care and anxiety for the Santals. He observed that during festivals and at several occasions (Santal) young men and girls enjoy dancing very much, they dance the whole night until cock-crow (Skrefsrud 1942, 1994).

The paper argues that this aesthetics owes its root to their unique approach towards time that reflects in a present-centric attitude. I prefer to underline it as the culture of present. It consists in thinking of present as real in a way in which the past and future are not. The past has ceased to exist and the future has not yet come to be. Hence *auri ge*,² suggesting, wait, and let us enjoy, drink and be merry. The Ho term *auri ge* thus uniquely expresses this aesthetics.³

For this paper the term 'aesthetics' has been used in a general sense signifying value oriented artistic attitude towards life that is reflected in the culture of a people. Further, since time is an important category for the understanding of the culture, it aims at studying temporality in the specific socio-cultural perspective only. It tries to underline the subjective meaning of temporality that the Adivasis of Jharkhand assign to it. Then it goes to study how in turn this attitude towards temporality affects their aesthetics resulting into the culture of present.

When I talk of Adivasi society here, I have in mind the majority of those still living in the villages and remaining more or less glued to the traditional way of life and not the fringe of the society who due to their education and urban setting have adapted to an acquisitive culture. I am also aware that over the decades even the Adivasi villagers have tended to deviate from their original world-view, yet there seems to be a nostalgic link with what they were before, showing thereby a crisis of identity that posits the Adivasis at the cross roads. However, this paper concentrates on their characteristic present-centric aesthetics that demands a serious attention both for academic and applied purposes.

Forming the Notion of Time

The problem in forming the notion of time lies in the fact that we can perceive only events occurring in time and not the time per se. Yet, we are able to form its notion on the basis of three basic modes of temporality, as given in our experience, viz., duration, succession, and simultaneity. We immediately become conscious of time on the basis of temporal relations such as earlier than, simultaneous with or later than. We are able to identify these in certain events of our experiences of before and now i.e. past or present. On this basis, we can very well judge in certain cases that one experienced event is later than or before another or simultaneous with some other in the same immediate way as we

² In Ho, *auri* means wait, until and *ge* stands for an enclitic emphasising the word to which it is affixed (Deeney 1975: 16,110).

³ I owe this information to my late father-in-law Sunil Kumar Sen, an advocate and author of *Tribal Struggle for Freedom: Singhbhum 1820-58*.

can judge that one perceived object is to the left or right to another. These modes of temporality are among the most fundamental characteristics of our experience. This, along with the awareness of duration through perceived changes in the objects, forms the basis of our knowledge of time. Thus empirically speaking, the notion of time is constructed from the temporal relations given to senses.

In 1877, W.W. Hunter observed that ‘In rural parts of the District (erstwhile Singbhum) such as the Kolhan and Parahat, there is no measure of time at all; and a peasant if asked the time, will simply point to the position of the sun’ (Hunter 1976: 86). His comment was in reference to measuring time through clock and calendar. This assessment is relevant even today. In remote villages of Kolhan people still point to the Singi or sun for indicating time. It is not very uncommon to suppose that the peoples at pre-literate stage lacked a clear notion of time as continuum.⁴ Obviously, more or less agrarian, relatively unspecialized, and pre-industrial Adivasi society lacked the modern measures of time. However, I would like to argue that they did understand temporality and had developed the mode of the measurement of time in their own characteristic way. They formed the notion of time through their direct experience of natural phenomena and the agricultural processes. This induced in them the notion of ecological time. The agricultural processes were instrumental to this notion. The sun, being the key factor to their agricultural instinct, governed their agricultural activities. It caused the agricultural events to happen in succession. All this was given to their experience. It thus explains their pointing to the position of sun in reply to any query relating to time. To their sensibility the position of the sun and the moon must have been the pointer of time.⁵ In the absence of watch obviously they employed the recurrent natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, the agricultural processes, changes in nature etc. for measuring time. Not only the Adivasi society, most of the agrarian peoples become aware of temporality through such direct experiences.

While recording various time as well as duration specific expressions of Ho dialect under the title ‘Time’. Lt. S.R. Tickell was perhaps aware of the above fact (Tickell 1840). The stages of the day are indicated by the words such as, *Seemko rar* (cock crow), *marsal* (light), *jete* (sunshine), *singee* (day light), *nooba* or *hende* (dark) under the heading Time. In Adivasi society, these are all temporal expressions signifying one or the other routine to be followed daily. Most interesting is that even calling of the cock (*seemko rar*) has been taken as the pointer of time, as if used as an alarm. Other expressions for the stages of the day are *Eedang bo* (very early), *Setta* (morning), *Tikin* (midday), *Tara singee* (after noon), *Aloab* (evening), *Needa* (night) and *Tala needa* (midnight). Under the heading days, month/ year, his glossary included: *Lising* (Today), *Gappa* (Tomorrow), *Hola* (Yesterday), *Holater* (Day before yesterday), *Miang* (Day after

⁴ For example, Vansina writes, ‘Absolute measurements of time on a uniform scale existed nowhere in oral society’ (Vasnina 1985: 174). Also Whorf’s comment on Hopi, the North American Indians of the pueblo culture of Arizona ‘(Thus the Hopi have)... no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate, through a present, into a past’ (Whorf 1979: 82).

⁵ It can be easily inferred that other modes common to oral societies would have also been employed to measure time, such as, memory, major events, age of the persons, social events etc. See for instance (Sen 2011). However, for the purpose of this paper I shall deal only with memory to some extent in the other section.

tomorrow), *Indree* (2 days after tomorrow), *Tertree* (3 days after tomorrow), *Ma* (A day), *Moosing* (One day), *Barsing* (Two days), *Appe ma* (Three days), *Kola man* (The other day). Month and Year: *Chandoo* (A month), *Sirma* (A Year), *Missad* (This Year), *Kalom* (Next Year), *Ter kalom* (Year after), and *Ma* (Last Year).

It is discernible that though there is a concept of seven consecutive days starting from day before yesterday to three days after tomorrow, we find neither synonym for a week nor the names of the days in their lexicons. Number or the names of months in a year have not also been reckoned. However, a Ho intellectual informs that in the Ho calendar (*Lith Gorgonid*) also a year consists of twelve months. Each month consists of thirty days. There are two *pakshas* (fortnight) consisting of fifteen days namely *punai* (purnima) and *Nirsandi* (amavasya). A week consists of seven days – *Ruihar* (sunday), *Sumihar* (Monday), *Mungruhar* (Tuesday), *Budhuhar* (Wednesday), *Guruhar* (Thursday), *Shukhar* (Friday) and *Shanihar* (Saturday).⁶ However, these are obviously recent developments.

A passage from Hunter significantly expresses the Adivasi notions of space, time and change. To quote ‘Local Kos of the Kolhan is stated to be the distance which a man can walk before a fresh-picked branch will wither in his hand’ (Hunter 1976: 86). It may be noted that in spite of the spatial distance of a *kos* (about two miles) being measured by a spatial tool e.g. a tape, it is also measured by the duration of time taken by a man to walk the distance with a fresh-picked branch in his hand that will start withering i.e. start changing.⁷ This shows that they grasp the spatial distance on an analogy of temporal duration and vice versa.

Another Mundari expression ‘*ruara sirmare, ruara kutuiulre*’, meaning, when the year has elapsed, when the time has revolved (Hoffmann and Emelen: Vol. 8, 2547) also supports the above notion. *Kutuiul* is the length of that part of the field over which the plough makes one complete turn. The duration of the year is being symbolically expressed here through the spatial distance of a plough. The above examples are suggestive of inferring that the Adivasi society is apt to thinking of space in terms of temporal duration and time in terms of spatial images. Their temporal language is therefore riddled with spatial metaphors. In their perception, space and time also seem to be relative to the observer as well as the system of measurement they employ. Probably the Adivasis also understood that duration signifies the temporal distance between the beginning and end of an event. This provides an insight into the working of their mind trying to form an empirical and pragmatic notion of time. However, it has to be accepted that they obviously lacked the abstract notion of time.⁸

⁶ Interview with Charan Hansdah, Former President, Ho Language Warankshiti Teachers’ Training and Research Centre, Bara Jhinkpani, Tonto Block, West Singhbhum.

⁷ We find similar observation by M.G. Hallet. (Hallett 1917: 173-74).

⁸ The developmental psychologist Luria in one of his experiments among the illiterate peasant Uzbeks of central Asia pointed out that such societies mainly depended on actual experience. He found that they refused to treat logical problems purely as hypothetical, as opposed to problems that could be solved only on the basis of actual experience. When presented with a problem in deductive inference, the subject refused to draw any inference replying ‘we always speak only of what we see; we don’t talk of what we haven’t seen’ (Hallpike 1979: 117-19).

The Time Cycles

Ruara sirmare, ruara kutuiulre

(When the year has elapsed, when the time has revolved)

Hoffman and Emelen, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, Vol. 8, 2547.

We commonly believe in the ‘myth of passage’ of time. We imagine time as a stream that flows from future through present to past. This is the linear concept of time. It has been a dominant notion in the west since the rise of Christianity which was subsequently accepted almost all over the world. Yet it is not universally held. The cyclical concept of time, that time flows not in a straight direction, rather it revolves in a cycle, has been the other significant approach to the problem of time. This view has been prevalent in the cultures of classical Greece and Rome, in Hindu and Buddhist traditions and in some indigenous societies as well.⁹ It must however be mentioned here that it is not time as such that is either linear or cyclical but the way of viewing the temporal process may differ.¹⁰

The Adivasis of Jharkhand seem to endorse the cyclical notion of time. The repetitive duration of day and night, seasons, household core and the agricultural operations produced in them a sense of temporal cycle. The practice of employing recurrent natural phenomena for measuring time also induced them to exercise a preference for cyclical notion of time rather than the linear one. Significantly enough, this notion of cyclical time has been expressed by the Mundas through the changes occurring in nature as they say: ‘when the new leaves and flowers appear on the trees we know that one year is over’ (Hoffmann and Emelen: Vol II, 383). These changes in the tree or nature are rotating.¹¹ Hence time is not linear. It rotates as if in a cycle. We can also refer the Mundari saying: ‘*ruara sirmare, ruara kutuiulre*’ in support (Hoffmann and Emelen: Vol. 8, 2547) as if, we can visualise the movement of time on *kutuiul* taking a complete turn to the point from which it started. Two cycles exemplify the cyclical notion of time very distinctly. First is the cycle of their daily routine and the second the annual cycle of their agricultural operations and related festivals.

The cycle of daily routine revolves around the sun. As if, it is contained in the mythical command of Haram: ‘ I have made the night, now you know what it is. From today work when there is light and rest at night, and on the morrow work again and when

⁹ The linear and cyclical notions of time are sometimes also represented as profane and sacred time. See ‘Basically, whereas profane time is historical and is best represented in a linear fashion, sacred time is essentially ahistorical and is best represented in a cyclical manner’ (Zerubavel 1981: 112). Also ‘Religious man experiences two kinds of time—profane and sacred. The one is an evanescent duration, the other a ‘succession of eternities’ (Eliade 1959: 104) and...sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites’ (Eliade 1959: 70).

¹⁰ As C. R. Hallpike remarks: ‘it is sheer confusion of thought to maintain that representations of linear process are one kind of time, representations of alternations a second, representations of cycles a third, and so on. There is only one time’ (Hallpike 1979: 343).

¹¹ That time is a non-spatial order in which things change, and changes signify some alterations in the condition of the continuant that undergoes changes with time, hence changes are rotative not the time qua time, was obviously difficult for them to conceive.

it gets dark, rest again' (Hoffmann and Emelen: Vol. 13, 3985-88), and so on again and again. The stages of a day caused by the position of the sun are significant for a daily agrarian schedule. The details are: *seemko rar* for leaving the bed; *setta singee* (sunrise) for getting engaged in fields or household works; *basian singee* for taking breakfast; *tikin singee* for midday meal and rest; *tara singee* for going back to the field; *basanda singee* for preparing dinner and other household work.¹² We find somewhat similar daily routine followed by the Oraon community of Jharkhand (Roy 1984: 117-19). The annual cycle of agricultural operations and related festivals of Ho, Munda, Oraon and Santal of Jharkhand also exemplify the cyclical notion of time (See Hoffman and Emelen; Majumdar 1937; Roy 1984; Troisi 1978: 119). However, it would be unfounded to conclude that the Adivasis approve only cyclical notion of time. It is not very uncommon that along with the dominant view the other notions of time have also prevailed in the same culture.¹³

It seems natural that in a cyclical notion of time there should be an extra emphasis on present. For in the cyclical framework, the temporal modes, viz., past, present and future, do not have the same meaning as in a linear context. The present is an extended present, not unique and irreversible as in the linear concept. Time does not flow in a linear fashion from future to past never to return on the same point. Rather, it revolves and the same moments of the day, same period of the month and year, keep returning again and again. Hence if time is not flowing from future to past, never to return then, certainly the present is not a duration less 'now' between past and future. Probably, it is an *extended present* rather than the 'specious present', 'a saddle- back from which we look in two directions into time' (James 1972: 135). In Adivasi context this is an *extended present* that overshadows both past and future.

Present-centric Temporality: The Roots

Nagen ruruntana nagen kamaitana. Orodo samaege banoa. Cimtan oroin ruruna?
(I rest now and work now. There is no other time than *now*. When else could I rest?)
Hoffman and Emelen, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, Vol. 13, 3986.

I begin this section with the above significant extract from the Munda myth related to the division of time. We come across various temporal expressions in the origin myths of Mundas, Hos, Santals and Oraons, the four major Adivasi communities of Jharkhand. To exemplify, the Munda myth relates the separation of land and sea starts with one such expression, quote 'When the sky was empty of stars and the earth all covered with water, the 'Old One' had made only the animals that lived in water'.¹⁴ The rest of the myth narrates the events of creation succeeding in a series in time until after the creation of the

¹² Interview with Sri Charan Hansda.

¹³ 'Conceptions of time in general can be of a timeless eternity, of cyclical times and of linear time, but no culture uses just one of these representations. Many use all three (Vansina 1985: 128). See also 'Although linear-consciousness may have been the dominant conception in Western culture, it has not been the exclusive one, and cyclical models have been proposed also at various times, and occasionally accepted by sections of the population, just as linear conceptions persisted within the Indo-Hellenic civilizations' (Barnsley 1972: 64).

¹⁴ *Sirma libilibi ote lealai dipili Haram daren jinjontuko baril bariakadko taikena* (Hoffman and Emelen: Vol. 13, 3981).

first human being and the first plough being given to him for cultivation. The eras relating to the creation of primordial waters and dry land, of plants and animals, of the first man and the plough, of sun and moon belonged to the primordial time, the *Munure*. But the primordial time is not chronological time comprising day and night, weeks and months and years, represented by the calendar. It is the *perpetual present*.

The myth regarding the division of time also provides an account of how before the moon was made the sun was alone in the sky and it did not set. Hence the time was only a static *now* for man. Everything he did was therefore in a perpetual *now*. When God asked him when did he make the fields, or when did he eat, work and take rest, his answer was *now*. It was because there existed no other time for him, neither a yesterday, i.e. the past, nor a tomorrow i.e. the future. God then felt that man would not thrive in this condition. So He decided to divide the time into day and night for the benefit of man. He created night for man to take rest and divided time into today and tomorrow.¹⁵ Interestingly, in this scheme ‘yesterday’ was completely non-existent, which leaves the picture somehow incomplete.

To this the Oraon version of the creation myth added the week. The story runs as follows:

Dharmes has (then) made only one day (i.e. night was not yet created). Then Dharmes asked them what day did you prepare this (field)? They said, to-day. After a time equal to (what would now be) seven days and nights, Dharmes asked (them) what day did you make this? They said, today. Then Dharmes said, Oh! the world (is)not (yet) as it should be. Let there be Day and Night. Then day and night came into existence. Next day Dharmes asked (them), when did you make this? They said, yesterday. Then the sun set, and the next day Dharmes asked (them) what day did you make this? They said, day before yesterday. In this way Dharmes went on asking (them) for seven (consecutive) days. Then with regard to the work remaining to be done, He asked them, when will you do these? They said this (we shall do) to-day, this tomorrow, and that the day after tomorrow.¹⁶ Then Dharmes said now the world of men is as it should be” (Roy 1984: 267).

Though the myths cannot offer us a rational and intelligible explanation of things or concepts, yet they can throw some light on the symbolic understanding of a notion by a people to whom they belong. The central idea of these myths is that the Adivasi notion of time is woven in and around their agricultural activities. It is believed that while tilling the land that the day and night are created, the day, for tilling and the night for rest. It also appears from the above myths that an extra emphasis on present lies deeper in the collective mentality of the Adivasis. I would like to signify it as the *lingering impression of the mythical now*, which seems to be at the root of the *culture of present*.

Time as Now: The Epistemology of present

An emphasis however on a certain mode of temporality viz., past, present or future is closely linked with the cognitive process adopted for a conception of time. As pointed out earlier actual experience is the fundamental source of knowledge in oral societies. An

¹⁵ For the detailed version of the myth see (Hoffman and Emelen: Vol. 13, 3985-88.).

¹⁶ One may add that this notion of yesterday, today and tomorrow roughly corresponds to the popular notion of the triadic time as past, present and future.

extra emphasis on present in Adivasi society also owes its basis to the source of knowledge employed by them. Their grasp of time is based on the actual experience of duration and succession inherent in natural and social processes. The notion of time is formed on the basis of temporal relations given to the senses during familiar activities. But one has to agree at the same time that temporal relations are given in the senses within the present itself. This leads in turn to an even more *conscious present*, of which one becomes aware on the basis of immediate experience.

On the other hand, how do we know the past and future? In an oral society, apart from immediate experience, memory plays an important role in the making of the corpus of knowledge. But here we face a genuine difficulty, memory moves only towards past and not towards future. If memory were the source of knowledge, even though we can have some knowledge of the past, a vision of future becomes impossible. It is because there is nothing in our experience analogous to memory of future. We have no murals, footprints or any traces of future in our memory. Though science or Buddhist cosmology may provide some solutions to this temporal asymmetry, yet on a mundane level this temporal asymmetry leads to a foggy vision of future. Absence of modern education and ignorance of the advancements made by science only add to it.

As far as knowing the past is concerned, here again memory has its own limitations. Let us not indulge into the philosophical debate whether memory should be regarded as a source of valid knowledge. Even then, there are a number of difficulties. Our fund of memories is constantly changing. While we are apt to lose the memory of earlier events, we at the same time acquire new ones. It is therefore very unlikely to recall a remote past. Vansina aptly remarks:

Ecological time deals with recurrent natural phenomena such as the day, the moon, the season and year. An actual count of such units did not go very far in the absence of writing or when mnemotechnic means were not used. These are repetitive durations and memory cannot cope with their numbering (Vansina 1985: 174).

Memory can hardly travel back more than three four generations. In addition, there may be a few more limitations of memory so far the Adivasi society is concerned: such as the absence of developed memo techniques, unpleasant recall of a certain past, strategic forgetting of the past and loss of faith in oral culture. Ultimately, it results into conditioning their attitude to past by the existentialist imperative of the present (Sen 2011: 87). Precariousness of recurrent natural phenomena as the measurements of time, lack of importance attached to time also added to a condensation of the memory. Hence knowing the remote past becomes highly improbable.

This then forms the epistemological basis for the present-centric attitude. The tribal society is thus left with a *lingering sense of present* leading to the undermining the past and a lack of future vision. This should not however lead us to the conclusion that for tribal society past and future are nonexistent and unreal. The only conclusion that seems logical is that there is an extra emphasis on present.

The Aesthetics: Culture of Present

An attitude towards time implies an aesthetic choice and affects the value-orientation of a society. In the Adivasi context this attitude of present-centric temporality culminates into a *culture of present*. We have seen that in the cyclical framework there persists no sense of losing the time in an un-recallable past, time slipping away like the sand from our fingers. There is no anxiety, no hurry and so wait, *auri ge*. An emphasis on the present thus induces them to assume a carefree, pleasure-seeking and easy-going aesthetics.

As time is not lost, so it does not possess the empirical value as in the linear notion. In Hinduism and Buddhism, this approach led to the depreciation of the empirical temporal world. Consequently, the ideal of life in these traditions was set outside the cycle of time. In Greek tradition, it reflected in the patterns of transcendental thought. As Needham remarks:

Salvation... could only be thought of as escape from the world of time, and this was partly what led, as some suppose, to the Greek fascination with the timeless patterns of deductive geometry and the formulation of the theory of Platonic "ideas"...' (Barnsley 1972:63)

But in the Adivasi context, this attitude towards time leads to an existence in timeless eternal present. Evidently, they never seek freedom or Moksha from the temporal world as the highest value. Their most cherished wish lies in remaining in perfect harmony and peace with the community, nature at large and the supernatural powers. This wish is fulfilled, when after death through the rite of *umbul ader* the dead is reinstated and finally integrated in the family and the community to remain in the family *ading* with the ancestors forever (Sen 2003). Till then, the present existence is the only reality for them. There is no other world, known to them that exists other than this. They neither believe in heaven or hell, nor in the cycle of rebirth (Sen & Sen 2002). Hence, nothing is to be achieved by worrying, one should enjoy life.

Philosophically speaking, this present-centric temperament brings them closer to *Carvaka* philosophy, however in a restricted sense. This closeness may be illustrated by comparing the following Ho song with the *Carvaka* ideology.

Let us be merry my dear,
Be merry as long this life lasts
We shall not find
We shall not find such joy,
We shall not live forever my dear.
Like the earth we shall not be lasting,
Like leaves we do not shoot into new leaves (Majumdar 1937: 82-83)

Compare this with *Carvaka*:

yavat jivet sukham jivet rinam kritwa ghritam pivet
Bhasmibhutasya dehasya punaragam kutah

Enjoy the life till you live, get pleasure at any cost because there is no coming back i.e. rebirth after this body goes to ashes.

Thus we find similar emphasis on present and the enjoyment of life in *Carvaka* and tribal worldviews. However, the similarity is not total. While the hedonistic ethics of *Carvaka* is based on a developed logic and epistemology, the Adivasi *culture of present* emerges not very consciously and logically but as a consequence of adopting a particular attitude towards time. The logic behind the enjoyment of life is no doubt the present centric aesthetics. But the Adivasi philosophy of life does not endorse the Carvaka ideology of seeking pleasure at any cost. Though Tuckey observes: ‘the Ho is not a good cultivator. He is lazy to take much pains about it, and if he can obtain sufficient from his land to support himself and his family he does not worry much about improvement’ (Tuckey 1920: 6), it would be rather more honest to say that they are a contented lot. Their tradition and customs endorse a use of natural resources with constraint and on substantial basis. For them the enjoyment of life follows as a natural outcome of being in perfect harmony and peace with the community, nature and the supernatural powers.

Conclusion

I must make it clear that when I talk of the *culture of present* in the context of the Adivasis, I do not mean that they only take into consideration the cyclical notion of time. With the spread of education and modernity even an illiterate Adivasi residing in some remote village today possesses the knowledge of calendar-centric time for all practical purposes. The point I have been trying to bring home has been a general Adivasi attitude that puts an extra emphasis on the present.¹⁷ However, the linear concept of time is generally viewed as conducive to the scientific progress and overall development. Consequently, though a present-centric aesthetics releases them from the burden both of past and future, this *culture of present* is sometimes also identified as a deterrent to their moral and material development as we generally think it to be. The crisis intensifies when their pleasure seeking worldview is generally castigated to oppose modernism and development. But then is this attitude not present in the members of other societies also, who are on the same socio- economic footings? Has not then the consciousness of one’s past and a vision of future has something to do with one’s socio-economic moorings? And again, is not passing a value judgment over present-centric aesthetics arbitrary in itself?

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¹⁷ Vansina remarks: ‘People in a community share many ideas, values, and images, in short, representations which are collective to them. . Nevertheless, collective representations remain fundamental in the minds of both literates and non literates’ (Vansina 1985: 124-25).

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Agriculture, Irrigation and Ecology in Adivasi Villages in Jharkhand: Why Control and Ownership over Natural Resources Matter

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Abstract

This article posits that the ecological and food security crisis in present-day rural Jharkhand is caused by privatisation of landholdings, appropriation of village land by the state, and lack of technological and infrastructural investment and support to agriculture by successive governments. In earlier times farming communities created small-scale storage works for the supplemental irrigation of paddy. This development of storage works was later constrained by the rigid private property rights regime initiated in the colonial period, and by state appropriation of village land post-independence. The management of some storage works was affected by the partial land reforms enacted post-independence. Since the 1980s there have been limited efforts by the government and NGOs to develop new small-scale irrigation systems, and even less to support pre-existing systems. To limit further ecological degradation and improve the food security of households, control over natural resources within village boundaries should be returned to village communities.

Introduction

This paper argues that the landholding structure in rural Jharkhand impedes the design and construction of new storage works, and the management of many pre-existing works. Case studies from two villages illustrate how agricultural production is hampered by a lack of accessible water sources, and in particular the staple paddy crop suffers due to a lack of supplemental irrigation. Groundwater is scarce and fairly inaccessible, and there has been limited development of wells for agriculture. Rivers and streams are deep bedded and seasonal. In the past families laid claim to stretches of rivers and created earthen and rock check dams across the breadth of the rivers, to capture and store monsoon flows. The water stored is manually lifted to irrigate vegetables, besides used for other purposes. Due to the depth of river beds, river water cannot be diverted by gravity to irrigate the surrounding farmland. Therefore farming communities created small-scale storage works to capture rainfall runoff from the catchment area, to irrigate their paddy crop during dry spells. The creation of new *bandhs* (reservoirs) and *talabs*

(ponds) would allow farmland outside of pre-existing works' command areas to be irrigated, however the extant landholding structure prevents the design and construction of new works by communities. The management of many pre-existing storage works is sub-optimal due to the effects of post-independence land reforms.

The question of why there has been an under-development of small-scale irrigation systems is not frequently asked. Irrigation research most often discusses systems that have already been constructed; either irrigation systems designed by state or NGO actors, or so-called traditional systems. In the Indian context the effect of colonialism on indigenous water technologies has been explored extensively (Sengupta 1980, 1985; Agrawal and Narain 1997; Hardiman 1998; Mosse 2003; D'Souza 2006, 2008). Sengupta (1980, 1982, 1985, and 1993) highlights the effects of colonial and post-colonial civil and land reforms upon indigenous irrigation systems, in particular systems located in southern Gangetic Bihar. The *Dying Wisdom* thesis (cf. Agrawal and Narain 1997) holds that colonial actions, such as the instituting of private property in land and dismantling of community control over land, led to the decline or substantial degradation of traditional systems. However subsequent work by Hardiman, Mosse, and D'Souza show that such sweeping statements do not hold in all cases. For example, Hardiman (1998) shows how peasant indebtedness and commercialisation not only predated colonial rule, but helped expand indigenous irrigation wells (cf. D'Souza 2006). Gadgil and Guha (1995) consider that the colonial state apparatus oversaw the collapse of traditional irrigation systems in areas considered unprofitable, and that the post-independence state has manoeuvred to transfer control of small-scale systems to the Minor Irrigation Department to gain control of the resource base. The fact that new irrigation systems have hardly been constructed by communities in the post-independence period is rarely discussed. One is left to assume that this paucity relates to the dependency farmers have come to place upon the state since it assumed control of village land and development planning post-independence.

Field research was conducted in 2004-05 in two villages located in Khairpal Gram Panchayat, Potka Block, East Singhbhum District (Figure 1). Three hamlets, populated by Santal, Bhumij and Dharua Gond communities respectively, were selected based on the presence of storage works as well as recently constructed lift irrigation systems. Some 49% of East Singhbhum's rural populace is *adivasi*, with Santal being numerically dominant, followed by the Bhumij (GoI 2001). Field research was both qualitative and quantitative, including observation, group meetings, in-depth interviews, wealth ranking and genealogies, mapping of landholding pattern and use, and collection and analysis of village records for three survey and settlements (1910, 1937 and 1964). This paper begins with an overview of the land-water-societal context in Jharkhand state and East Singhbhum. It then presents an analysis of four storage works, discussing their design, construction and subsequent management, followed by a discussion of how and why landholding structure can be seen to have impeded the further (new) creation of storage works by communities, and to have affected the management of some pre-existing systems. The paper concludes with some recommendations.

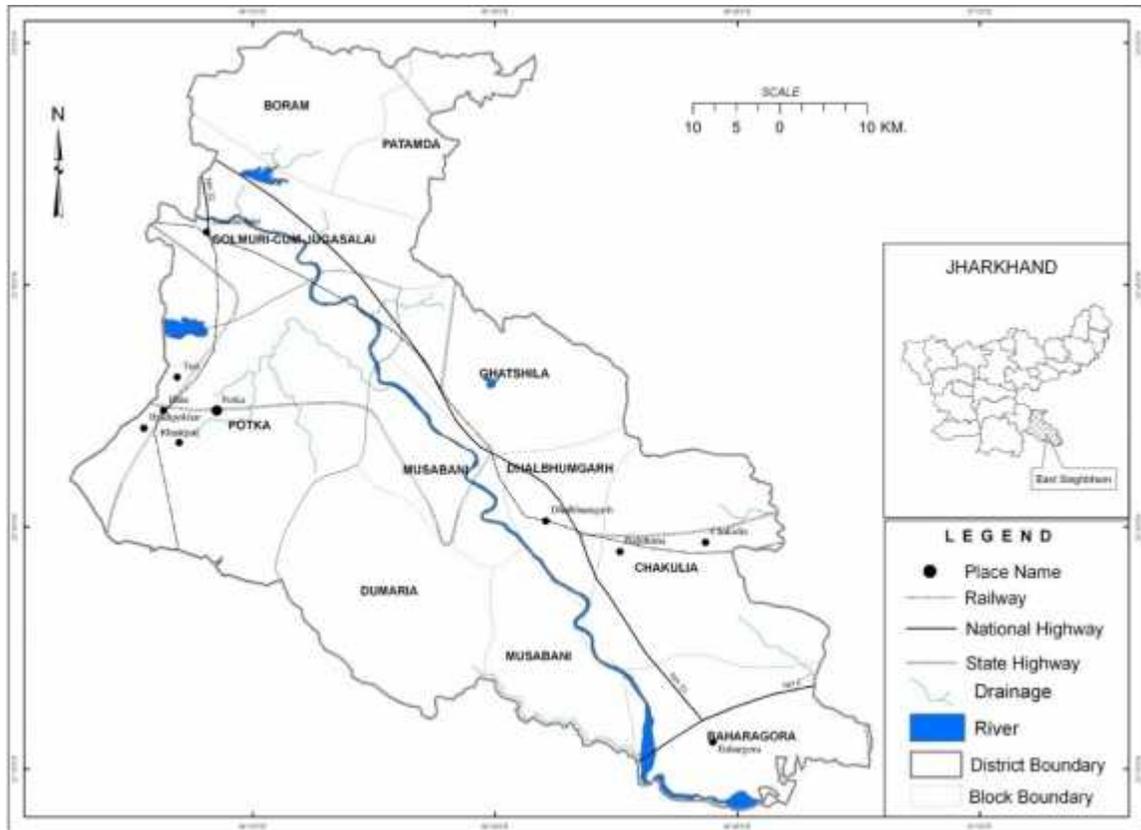


Figure 1. Location of Potka Block (and Khairpal Gram Panchayat) within East Singhbhum District

Land-water-societal context in East Singhbhum District, Jharkhand

Jharkhand became independent as India's 28th state in November 2000. Its people had suffered over five decades of poor governance having been appended to Bihar state on India's independence in 1947. Local-level democratic checks and balances have been absent in the villages of Jharkhand for the past three decades or so, due to the inability of successive governments to hold panchayat elections since 1978 (elections were finally held in early 2011). This helped local contractors, block-level bureaucrats and members of legislative assembly (MLAs) to control and one assumes mispend public funds intended for rural development works. Jharkhand's agro-ecological and socio-economic credentials relate a now familiar tale; one of the richest states in India in terms of its mineral and forest resources, economically Jharkhand is one of the poorest states. In an assessment of rural India, in 2001 Jharkhand was ranked (with Bihar) India's most food insecure state, and (separate from Bihar) as having India's highest percentage of population living below the poverty line (MSSRF/WFP 2001). By 2008, in a revised and more comprehensive assessment, Jharkhand again secured the unfortunate ranking of most food insecure state in India (MSSRF/WFP 2008). Food insecurity relates not only to limited or lack of access to nutritious food, but also to clean water and sanitation. Hence Jharkhand's ranking reflects its history of neglect and under-development, which extends to the agricultural domain where the majority of cultivation remains rainfed.

The area irrigated in Jharkhand state is unclear because of differences in terminology used and lack of referencing of data sources in government reports. For example, Jharkhand's new state government in 2002 produced the document 'Vision 2010' which stated that the net irrigated area was 157,000 hectares, and that it planned to increase the irrigated area of the state from 8% to 25% by 2010 (GoJ 2002). In 2008 NABARD Consultancy Services (NABCONS) was entrusted to prepare the Jharkhand 'State agriculture development plan, 2008-09 to 2011-12'. NABCONS stated its plan to double the area under assured irrigation from 157,000 to 314,000 hectares, half through irrigation potential already created, and half through proposed minor irrigation investments (NABCONS 2008). If correct, the data suggests that little or no progress was made in improving irrigation coverage through 2002 to 2008. Jharkhand was bypassed in the process of agricultural transformation known as the 'Green Revolution', and a National Rain-fed Area Authority to implement a comprehensive programme for the development of rainfed areas was constituted only in 2006 (Sharma et al. 2008).

East Singhbhum District falls within the 'South Eastern Plateau' sub-zone of India's 'Eastern Plateau and Hills Region' agro-climatic zone. At about 100 metres above sea level, the climate in this sub-zone is humid to sub-tropical, and characterised by plentiful but uneven distribution of rainfall. Average annual rainfall is between 1300 and 1350 mm, with roughly 80% falling within the south-west monsoon period June to September, and precipitation during the winter months scanty and highly variable (GoJ nd). The plateau's eroded soils are of poor fertility and have a low water-retaining capacity, and groundwater availability is scarce and its exploitation has been minimal (GoJ nd; NABCONS 2008). Managing extreme rainfall variability in time and space is considered the greatest challenge in such rainfed semi-arid and dry sub-humid tropical regions (Sharma et al. 2008). In Jharkhand the probability of deficient rainfall (< 25% of the normal) during the south-west monsoon period is once in five years (Sharma et al. 2008). Dry spells, generally of 2-4 weeks of no rainfall, occur in most cropping seasons. Such rainless periods may be termed early season drought, mid-season drought, or terminal drought. Early season drought is often mitigated by replacement with short-duration crop varieties or change in the cropping pattern. However droughts at the latter two stages, particularly at critical growth stages, can potentially cause partial or complete crop failure (Sharma et al. 2008), which is why supplemental irrigation is needed to bridge these gaps.

The 'South Eastern Plateau' region, synonymous with Singhbhum District until its division in 1990-91, is a neglected area having experienced little agricultural development since India's independence. Bhalla and Singh (2001) show that Singhbhum is one of just 17 districts out of India's 281 districts that maintained a low growth (<1.5%) of agricultural output in two consecutive periods, 1962-63 to 1980-83, and 1980-83 to 1990-93. In the same period, from 1961 to 1990-93, the proportion of gross irrigated area to gross cropped area fell from 6.8% to 3.9% (Prasad 1961; Bhalla and Singh 2001). This low proportion of irrigated land ensures that water deficiency at critical crop growth stages is a major constraint of rainfed agriculture. However water itself may not always be the primary limiting factor for food production. Low-input farming means faster depletion of soils, as stagnant yields and rising populations lead farmers to exhaust local soil-water resources and expand to more scanty and vulnerable lands (Lipton 2009; cf. Sharma et al. 2008). Consumption of fertiliser in Singhbhum increased from 0.80

kg/ha of net sown area in 1962-65 to just 10.51 kg/ha by 1990-93 (Bhalla and Singh 2001). These levels are fairly low when compared with Bihar as a whole (2.96 to 85.36 kg/ha through 1962-65 to 1992-95), and very low when compared with Green Revolution targeted areas, e.g. north-west India (4.29 to 163.62 kg/ha through 1962-65 to 1992-95) ((Bhalla and Singh 2001). The incomplete introduction of new seed-fertiliser-irrigation technologies led to unintended outcomes in rainfed areas: for example, increased fertiliser use without assured irrigation has the effect of increasing output in years of good monsoon rains, but decreasing output in years of poor rainfall ((Bhalla and Singh 2001).

Land reform between 1949-50 and 1964-65 was another agricultural policy central to the Green Revolution and its successes (Bhalla and Singh 2001). Yet in Jharkhand there has been no substantial land reform, such as imposition of ceiling and redistribution of excess lands to marginal and landless farmers, or land consolidation. To understand East Singhbhum's landholding structure, which is peculiar due to restrictions placed on the transfer of adivasi land, some contextualisation is required. Prior to the arrival of the British in the late 18th century, the region was colonised by various adivasi and non-adivasi communities.¹ Present-day East Singhbhum District is contiguous with the erstwhile Dhalbhum chieftdom, one of several adivasi Bhumij chieftdoms in the region in the centuries prior to the British invasion and territorial conquest. During this earlier period some social stratification in adivasi society developed, and many non-adivasi settlers arrived and were granted villages/land in return for religious and secular services provided to the Bhumij chiefs (Sinha 1962; Sen 2010). The Sanskritic courtly culture of adivasi chiefs, argue Thapar and Siddiqi (2003 [1979]), would not have impacted the majority of adivasi society because land relations would have preserved adivasi identity: available forest and wasteland, and a relatively sparse population would have allowed the continuing possibility of new *khuntkattis*, i.e. more land being brought under cultivation.² In this period storage works³ likely remained under-developed due to possibilities for farmland expansion.

The British extended the Permanent Settlement to Dhalbhum in 1800; its primary objective being to secure revenue payable by *zamindars* (the erstwhile chiefs or their relatives) (Sengupta 1982). The settlement led to the peasantry's indebtedness to local landlords and moneylenders, further loss of control over land and other resources, and erosion of local authority for adivasis (Upadhyaya 2009). The colonial agrarian world was reordered as some kind of an economic and political hybrid, with zamindars shaped as 'rack renting quasi-feudal landlords', the creation of a series of intermediate tenure-holders (including *pradhani* village headmen), and the realisation of capitalist private property in land (D'Souza 2004). The introduced notion of family/individual property challenged the traditional adivasi system of communal ownership of land, and

¹ Bhumij society was organised into chieftdoms by the 16th century (Areeparampil 2002), possibly as early as the 13th (Sinha 1962).

² *Khuntkatti* was the *adivasi* system of social organisation, through which *khuntkattidars*, the descendents of those who first converted forestland into agricultural lands, received superior collective and individual rights over village land.

³ In 1773 Baber wrote of the Dhalbhum tract, "there is very little land cultivated in this whole extent and very disproportionate part of it capable of cultivation [the soil] is very rocky-the country is mountainous and overspread with thick woods which render it in many places impassable" (in Jha 1967). The number of villages in Dhalbhum increased from 145 villages in 1790, to 1640 villages 120 years later (Reid 1911).

mechanisms for mortgaging and sale of lands encouraged the more avaricious among adivasis to accumulate additional lands (Sen 2004). Jha (1989) describes it thus; the “traditional divisions or distribution of tribal land were now replaced by a rigid landlord-tenant relationship”. Thapar and Siddiqi (2003 [1979]) argue that mid 19th century the British paradoxically sought to protect zamindars and their estates, to maintain political stability, precisely when they should have abandoned such policies to stimulate agriculture. As a result landlords (zamindars and intermediaries) lived off mismanaged estates without paying attention to their tenant cultivators (Thapar and Siddiqi 2003 [1979]), as occurred in Dhalbhum Estate on several occasions late 19th century.

The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 (Bengal Act VI of 1908) introduced laws that restricted the sale or transfer of lands from adivasi to non-adivasis, and protected khuntkatti rights on land. However it was enacted too late: few such villages still existed (Devalle 1992). By the time of the first survey and settlement operations in Dhalbhum, conducted between 1906-1911, 3/5ths of village tenures were *pradhani* (a reclaiming tenure) held by *pradhans* (headmen) and just 1/5th were *ghatwali* held by khuntkatti Bhumij headmen (Reid 1911). The colonial government was unconcerned with creating irrigation works in these tracts, because revenue was fixed and the government had nothing to gain from extending irrigation (Sengupta 1991). However significant numbers of storage works had already been created by farming communities, either by families or under the leadership of village headmen (see Reid 1911).⁴ The main source of land rights for farmers in the present-day remains the record of rights (or *khatian*) that were created during the initial survey and settlement operations of 1906-11. A revisional survey was completed by 1937 in Singhbhum. It seems likely that between the first and second surveys little change took place aside from generational land subdivision and some land sale (see Upadhyaya 2009 who finds the same for Ranchi). The land records were published in three parts, the record of rights to individual plots, the record of community rights, and the village note. During research the sample villages’ records were sought and obtained from the District Record Room Chaibasa: the first part was complete and the third part poorly filled in. However the second part, the record of community rights, had either not been created or not been stored.

After Independence the Bihar government took five years to adopt the 1947 Zamindari Abolition Bill (land reform measures). In 1952 reforms took place, but only after much dilution (Sengupta 1982). Zamindari abolition had perhaps a deeper impact on adivasi land rights than had previous colonial reforms (Upadhyaya 2009). The reforms provided for the ‘vesting’ in the state of all lands, estates, and interests other than *raiyyati* (farmer) lands, and for the abolishment of all intermediary tenure holders: zamindars, estate managers, and village headmen. Two types of land tenure remained thereafter; Mundari khuntkatti⁵ and *raiyyati*, and lands ‘vested’ in the state (Upadhyaya 2009). The second revisional survey conducted in Singhbhum between 1958 and 1965 allowed the state to record their appropriation of community lands (land previously recorded in the name of

⁴ Upadhyaya (2009) discusses in detail the content of the land rights conferred to both *khuntkattis* and ordinary *raiyyats* (farmers/cultivators) and notes that though *raiyyats* were the majority, it is khuntkattidars and their rights that have formed the basis of adivasi struggles against the state in the post-colonial period.

⁵ The Bhumij are considered Mundari adivasis, as are, for example, Mundas and Santals. In the research villages only some of Kestrapal’s Bhumij households are khuntkattidars; the majority are *raiyyats*.

headmen were transferred to the category of government land).⁶ According to the settlement report, about 40% of Singhbhum district's land was assumed by the state during the second revisional survey, half of which was under community control beforehand, and half with the forest department (Prasad 1970, quoted in Upadhyaya 2009). Upadhyaya is wrong, however, to claim that the reforms 'did not materially affect the holdings of *raiya*ts or self-cultivators because the government merely took the place of the landlord to whom rent is paid' (Upadhyaya 2009). In the process of the reforms, control over many storage works shifted from collective ownership by communities to private ownership by former headmen.

The design, construction and management of four storage works

Research was conducted in two neighbouring revenue villages located in Khairpal Gram Panchayat. The villages have differing histories: Gurbhanga was a *pradhani* village whereas Kestrapal was a *ghatwali* village during the colonial period.⁷ Gurbhanga is a young village, having been established when (German Lutheran) Christian Oraon settlers arrived from Ranchi District in 1882 (Chatterji 1910). Aside from a small Bhumij settlement on the roadside, the village was uninhabited and covered by forest. By contrast, in the much older Bhumij village of Kestrapal, the *khuntkatti* rights of several Bhumij families were recognised in the first and second survey and settlement operations; as were several types of Bhumij hereditary political office.⁸ At the time of zamindari abolition, the headmen of *pradhani* villages and *ghatwali* villages were stripped of their hereditary political authority in dealings with the state, however erstwhile *ghatwals* retained their locally recognised social status because of their protected (*khuntkatti*) land rights status.

The two villages each comprise three hamlets, which in the present day function as somewhat independent villages. In-depth study was conducted in three of the six adivasi hamlets in 2005: Champi, in Gurbhanga, populated by 26 Santal households and two Christian Oraon households (descendants of the former headman); Kestrapal hamlet, in Kestrapal revenue village, inhabited by 41 Bhumij households (both *khuntkattidar* and *raiya*ts), and a family of landless Paramaniks; and Manglasai, in Kestrapal, populated by 31 Dharua Gond households.

The four storage works discussed here are of two social types: built by village headmen with the labour of the village community; and built by individual *raiya*ts/farmers by the labour of their family members and hired-in help.⁹ The four storage

⁶ Singhbhum is one of few districts in Jharkhand where a post-independence re-survey was completed (Upadhyaya 2009). This is possibly due to its proven mineral wealth?

⁷ To ensure the safety of the villagers, the village names are fictionalised both here and in my thesis (Hill 2008).

⁸ *Sardar ghatwals* were chiefs of a number of villages, *naik ghatwals* were village headmen, and *paik ghatwals* were 'watchmen' subordinate to *naik ghatwals*. Kestrapal had a *sardar ghatwal* in 1910, whose son was recorded in the 1937 revisional survey and settlement as a *naik ghatwal* alongside two *paik ghatwals*.

⁹ Sen (2008) lists four social types for the neighbouring Kolhan region (now West Singhbhum), which also include *bandhs* created by the *raiya*ts of more than one village, and those built at the initiative and expense of the government.

works include three bandhs (three-sided reservoirs) and one *talab* (a four-sided pond). Bara Bandh in Kestrapal and Toppo's Bandh in Champi were each built under the direction of their respective villages' headmen in the colonial period. Bara Bandh, having a surface area in 2005 of 1.16 ha, was constructed before the first survey and settlement (pre-1910), whereas Toppo's Bandh, of 1.26 ha surface area, was created sometime between the first and second settlements (between 1910 and 1937). Two of Champi's Santal families, around 1920-1930 and 1945-1950 built Mona's Bandh and Surai's Talab respectively. As a result these are smaller works, having surface areas of 0.34 and 0.26 ha respectively. Although all four storage works may seem small, they are capable of providing supplemental irrigation to an area of farmland about five times their surface area and each serve to secure the paddy harvest of up to ten households. For example, Surai's Talab irrigates about 1.3 ha of farmland owned by four households.

Paddy farming remains a central livelihood in the villages because rice is the staple food, used for brewing rice beer, and used in rituals throughout seasonal and life cycles. For adivasis, land is not only a source of livelihood but life itself, both physical and spiritual (Mullick 2005). Aside from food production, land is valued for its ability to provide security, reinforce a sense of personhood, and offers access to credit, labour and other exchange entitlements (Rao 2009). In 2005 over three-quarters of households in the villages pursue agriculture as their primary or secondary livelihood. Households cultivate paddy on their own land, and under contract or share cropping tenurial arrangements. For example, in 2005 Champi's 28 households between them cultivated 34.7 ha of their own land, and half of these households cultivate another 10.1 ha of others' land, a total of 44.8 ha and an average of 1.6 ha per household. Land availability to a great extent determines the livelihood strategies of households. Those having insufficient land also work in the non-agricultural sector, mining rocky outcrops, and working as wage labourers both nearby and as migrants. In Champi 15 households pursued migratory work, and six had service-orientated jobs; whereas these livelihoods were not pursued by the villagers of Manglasai and Kestrapal.

In Champi in 1910, before the creation of its storage works, land was fairly abundant and just 36% of the entire revenue village's geographical area had been converted to agricultural land (Table 1). In contrast, by 1910 61% of the older Kestrapal revenue village's total area was already under paddy cultivation, which likely would have already been restricting the further creation of storage works. The area under cultivation in Gurbhanga quickly rose, to 64% of its area by the second survey and settlement in 1937, while the cultivated area in Kestrapal rose to 73% in the same period. Kestrapal's inhabitants had by this time almost exhausted possibilities to bring further land under the plough. By the time of the 2001 census, three-quarters of each revenue village's land was under cultivation, mostly mono-cropped with paddy. This includes marginal land unsuitable for paddy cultivation.

Year	Kestrapal (Total area: 199 ha)		Gurbhanga (Total area: 181 ha)	
	Cultivated area	Percent of total	Cultivated area	Percent of total
1910	120 ha	61	64 ha	36

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1937	145 ha	73	114 ha	64
1964	152 ha	77	127 ha	70
2001	150 ha	75	132 ha	73

Table 1. Proportion of Kestrapal and Gurbhanga's areas under cultivation
Source: 1910, 1937, 1964 data from village records, 2001 data from 2001 census.

Average landholdings per household fell over the period 1910 to 2005, due to population growth, subdivision of land, and the exhaustion of land of cultivable quality available for conversion. In all three hamlets there is a shift from most households having large (>5 ha) or medium (2.5-5 ha) holdings in 1910, to having small or marginal holdings in 2005 (Table 2). Only two households in Champi, through government service, have managed to increase their landholdings via land purchase (to >5 ha). In Kestrapal the eight households having large and medium landholdings in 2005 are all descendents of the village's various ghatwals. Landlessness has emerged in the revenue village of Kestrapal due to land sales by current raiyats' forefathers (in Manglasai), and conflict and forced dispossession (via marriage and by a descendent of the *ghatwali* headman, in Kestrapal).

Farm size typology	Area owned (ha)	Kestrapal (households)		Manglasai (households)		Champi (households)	
		1910	2005	1910	2005	1910	2005
Large	>5	4	4	2	0	2	2
Medium	2.5-5	9	4	1	3	3	3
Small	1-2.5	2	13	2	8	1	2
Marginal	<1	1	17	0	16	0	21
Landless	0	0	3	0	4	0	0
Total	-	16	41	5	31	6	28

Table 2. Landholding category by hamlet and household over time (1910 and 2005)

By 2005 the distribution of landholdings among owner-cultivators in the three research hamlets (combined) is skewed and unequal. Overall the average owner-cultivator landholding is 1.43 ha, however of 94 sampled owner-cultivators only 27 (29%) have over this landholding size. The six households with the largest holdings own nearly one-third (31%) of land, having an average of 6.95 ha. About 84% of the owner-cultivating households with marginal (>0-1 ha) and small (1-2.5 ha) landholdings own just 46.3% of the land. This pattern is just slightly more equitable than the all-India situation: in 2003 marginal and small landholdings constituted 86% of total operational holdings in India, but covered only 43.5% of area (Reddy and Mishra 2008).

An analysis of paddy production in Champi for the years 1910, 1964 and 2005 reveals that all resident households likely produced surplus paddy in years of normal or good rainfall in 1910, whereas 45% did so in 1964, and only a quarter were able to by 2005

(Table 3).¹⁰ Naturally there is a correlation between marginality in landholding and deficit paddy production, but this has been aggravated by the almost total lack of agricultural development over the decades. The agricultural techniques, production and yields appear to have remained unchanged over the past century. For example, there is little difference between the paddy yield of 1910, 1432 kg/ha (from a calculation made by Reid 1911), and that of 2005, 1444 kg/ha (calculation made using field data). The benefits of the few farm inputs used in the present-day, such as urea fertiliser, are likely offset by soil degradation caused by mono-cropped paddy and widespread ecological degradation, such as the extensive felling of trees and mining of outcrops, all of which affect the local hydrological regime and farm soil condition. The analysis shows that farming has become steadily and increasingly unviable in the villages due to reduction in landholding, partial land reform, and absence of agricultural support from successive governments.

Year	Number of households, according to land typology				Total number of households	Paddy production	
	Large	Medium	Small	Marginal		Surplus	Deficit
1910	2	3	1	0	6	6	0
1964	1	0	8	13	22	10	12
2005	2	3	2	21	28	7	21

Table 3. Paddy production in Champi in 1910, 1964 and 2005 (by household)
Source: 1910, 1964 data derived from village records, 2005 data from field research.

With little irrigation coverage in the hamlets, cultivation of paddy is at the mercy of the monsoon, the amount, timing and duration of rainfall being key to a good harvest. The storage works in the research hamlets were designed and developed with local means at a time when land was fairly abundant, villagers as a community (albeit overseen by a headman) controlled the land within their village boundary, and when a majority of households even without access to supplemental irrigation likely harvested a surplus of paddy in years of good or normal rainfall. The “land factor” partly explains why three significant storage works were created post-1910 in Champi, whereas in the older village Kestrapal, where three storage works already existed by 1910, no further storage works were created. Cooperative forms of organisation with communities is another important factor, for in the absence of state support, the creation and maintenance of storage works necessitates planning, labour and funds.

Toppo’s Bandh

The Christian Oraon headman (pradhan) of Gurbhanga revenue village, and two or three Santal families, created Champi’s first storage work, Toppo’s Bandh (Figure 2),

¹⁰ The methodology, based on data from the Village Record of Rights for 1910 and 1964, a calculation used by Reid (1911) and field data collected in 2005, is given in Hill (2008).

sometime between 1910 and 1937. One presumes that the Santals worked without pay to construct the storage work, though the headman likely fed and provided them rice beer, as is customary. The storage work is listed in the 1937 settlement record of rights under the headman's name, who according to Santal oral history shared the bandh's water with those Santal farmers having land in its command area. At this point Toppo's Bandh was small, as were the number of households in the village/hamlet. One Santal elder fondly recalled the village's pradhan, saying 'he was a very good man. He used to give [irrigation] water'. During the pre-independence period the bandh was likely maintained by community labour.

Following India's independence intermediary (zamindari) tenures were abolished, and erstwhile village headmen lost their hereditary offices becoming on a par with other villagers/raiyats. Up until the mid 1950s when Panchayati Raj was introduced and block development offices created, erstwhile headmen remained important figures locally. Gurbhanga's ex-headman and his son maintained their influence by involving themselves in the newly evolving political and administrative set up. This allowed them, around 1955, to take a loan from the newly created Potka Development Block to enlarge Toppo's Bandh. The loan, according to a Santal elder, was for 1400 rupees, of which about half was spent on the storage work; the Toppo's paid the Santals a wage labour rate of 5-7 rupees per day, so perhaps 100 man-days were spent excavating soil.¹¹ According to Santal discourse, the 1955 loan was taken by Toppo and several Santals. Together they later petitioned the block office to waive the loan repayment, claiming that the storage work provided plenty of irrigation water for the public good. The debt was absolved.

During the 1964 survey and settlement, Toppo's Bandh was recorded under the name of the former headman's son. As he was now a raiyat, it effectively became his private property. He began to deny Santals access to the storage work's water, saying that the bandh was his property. During this period Champi's Santal population, who by the early 1960s numbered about 21 households, elected a Santal *manjhi* (headman) and *naike* (priest). In the early 1980s, one of the grandsons of Gurbhanga's former headman assumed control of Toppo's Bandh. To the dismay of the many Santals having land in the command area, he resolutely decided to utilise the water by and for himself only.

In 2005 Toppo's Bandh has seven co-owners, six Toppo brothers and their mother. Their command area land (about 10 ha) is divided into seven shares. Three of the brothers live in towns, and Santal households sharecrop their land. The mother maintains a couple of large individual plots in her name, which she sublets to Santal farmers. The three brothers living in Gurbhanga farm their own land, in most years irrigating from the bandh during dry spells. However the Santal households having land in the bandh's command area, and those who sharecrop the Toppo's land, are denied irrigation water. In the rabi (winter) season one of the Toppo households uses water from the bandh to grow vegetables, employing some Santal women to help him. He is the only farmer to do so. The Santal grow winter season vegetables along the riverside, manually lifting water to irrigate the crops. Toppo's Bandh is nowadays not maintained, and as a result has a reduced storage capacity, and a lesser productive capacity for fish culture. Most of the Santal community consider Toppo to be selfish and uncooperative. However they have

¹¹ Rupees equivalent is difficult to estimate. In 2005, a daily wage labour rate would be 50-70 rupees privately or about 90 rupees per day working under a government scheme.

internalised the property rights regime imposed upon them, and consider Toppo's Bandh to be the Toppo's private property.

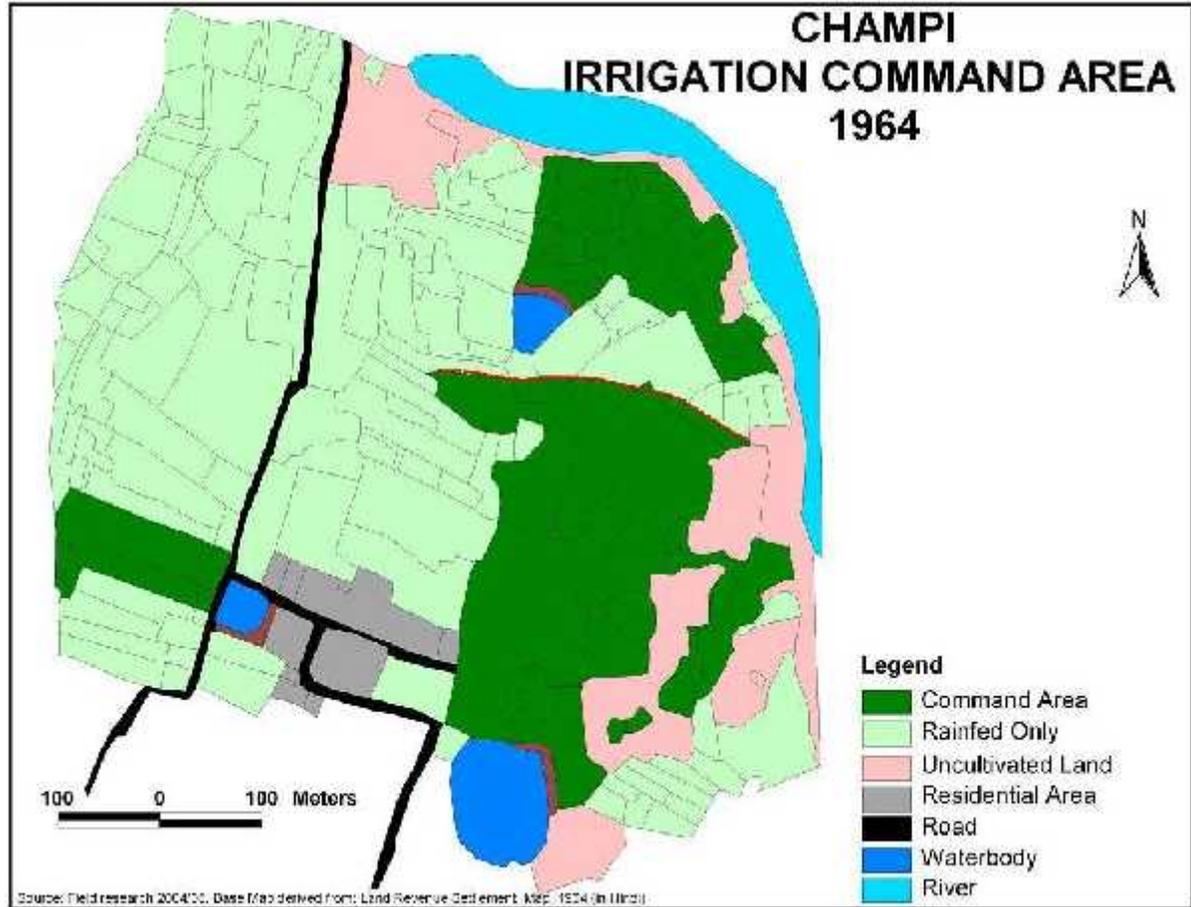


Figure 2. Champi's three storage works and commands areas in 1964. Clockwise from top: Mona's Bandh, Toppo's Bandh, and Surai's Talab

Mona's Bandh

Mona's Bandh was built sometime after Toppo's Bandh. Mona constructed the storage work with the help of his four sons, their wives, and his daughter who returned from her marital village. The storage work has always had a low capacity. Fish culture has rarely been pursued due to its distance from the village. The storage work is listed in the 1937 settlement under Mona's name, and in 1964 as being co-owned by two grandsons from Mona's eldest son, and his other three sons. This family own all the farmland in the command area, which extends to the riverside (Figure 2). The bandh faces management problems which stem from the distribution of farmland and homestead land.

In 2005 ten households descend from Mona, nine of which have land in Mona's Bandh's command area. Santal custom holds that when farmland is divided amongst sons, the eldest son should receive an extra share of land, for it becomes his responsibility to entertain and feed affinal relatives when they visit the village. Over time landholdings have become unequally distributed due to land subdivision. Several households argue that

the practise of distributing a larger portion of land to the eldest son no longer exists, so land should be redistributed within the family. However the largest landholder is not interested in such reform. Confounding the problem is the matter of homestead land. In 2005 seven of the households continue to live on their ancestral homestead plot, one of which is the largest landholder, who has colonised a large part of the plot. The remaining six households are resentful of this. These seemingly trivial land conflicts have led to some disruption in the management of their bandh. The co-owners of Mona's Bandh are unwilling to sit together to discuss the bandh's management including its repair and water distribution.

Surai's Talab

Surai's Talab is a four-sided below-surface pond with a submerged *katchua kuan* (earthen dug-well) in its centre. One Santal elder recalled how he was about 25 years old when his father Surai, having seen Mona excavate his bandh, decided that he would do the same. The talab was designed to provide supplemental irrigation to their mono-cropped paddy and not for pisciculture. Surai had hired Bhumij labour from their nearby mother village, and remunerated the labourers in paddy. Buffalos were used to remove the soil. The well in the centre was created later, after Surai's youngest son's marriage, and used to be deep with steps around its sides. The well fell out of use when the Indian Mark II hand-pump was introduced to the village.

In the present-day Surai's Talab (Figure 2) is effectively managed. Several important attributes abet this. Only four of its six co-owners have land in its small command area, and two of these are relatively wealthy, which aids the planning and implementation of management tasks. Located adjacent to the settlement, theft of fish is near impossible, so besides supplemental irrigation, the talab allows for fish culture and sale. The talab's physical location at the entrance to Champi means that it is seen and used on a daily basis by nearly all the villagers. The majority of Santal women and children use it for bathing and washing their clothes throughout most of the year, and cattle are forbidden from entering it. Because all the Santal households use the talab, they are willing to support the co-owners in maintenance activities. The co-owners refer to themselves as 'Surai's Union'. In the summer of 2005 the co-owners 'cleaned' the talab. First, a diesel engine pump-set was hired and the water drained from the bottom of the talab, into a smaller talab located nearby. Next, the co-owners invited the villagers to come and take away the silt deposited in the talab. At least nine Santal households sent their own household members, servants (typically young and poor adivasis from nearby villages), or hired labour (Santal and Bhumij). The labourers manually dug out the silt, some even using their hands, and piled it on the talab's inner banks. They laboured for two or three weeks in this way. Then, either manually or using a bullock cart, the households transferred the silt to their farm plots, and soon afterwards ploughed it in.

Bara Bandh

Kestrapal's Bara Bandh (big bandh) was created around the 1880s by Bhumij and Dharua Gond hired labourers. It was constructed by Kestrapal's Bhumij headman (ghatwal) for supplemental irrigation, domestic use, and possibly as a show of strength and status. In the 1910 survey and settlement it was listed as khuntkatti land, with no rent

to be imposed, in the name of the ghatwal's son. Between 1910 and 1937 the headman's family split into two parties, most likely due to land pressure. The son remained in Kestrapal hamlet, while his father's second wife and his half-brother relocated to the eastside of the village to found Namotola hamlet. In 1937 the bandh's ownership was recorded in ten parts (*ansh*), five with the Kestrapal party and five with the Namotola party. By this time a grandson of the former ghatwal had inherited the office of headman, and was recorded as Kestrapal revenue village's headman (naik ghatwal). Several elderly Dharua Gond from Manglasai recalled from their childhood, around the time of Indian independence, the Bhumij headman coming to their hamlet to distribute fish from the bandh. They also recall that those Dharua Gond who had land in the command area of the bandh were allowed to take supplemental irrigation.

The exact history of Bara Bandh is difficult to reconstruct partly because there are few Bhumij elders alive today. A Dharua Gond elder of Manglasai claimed that during the 1964 revisional survey several of Kestrapal's dominant Bhumij households, by bribery, managed to get command area land owned by several Gond households settled and recorded in their names. During the same survey, Bara Bandh's ownership was recorded in 24 parts, 12 with the Kestrapal party and 12 with the Namotola party. Within each of these 12 parts are further, unequal subdivisions. Unlike in Gurbhanga where due to its pradhani history the erstwhile headman's family lost its political power, in Kestrapal the ghatwal's great-grandson retained his status as headman up until his death in 1985 (on the strength of his family's khuntkatti heritage). The last headman's death created a political vacuum in the village that remains to the present-day.¹² On his death, his son and nephew (great, great-grandsons of the ghatwal) assumed dominant political roles in village affairs, however under their leadership inter-hamlet relations in the village soured and villagers ceased to celebrate functions together, or to jointly hold meetings. Irrigation is denied to the Gond households having command area land.

Of Bara Bandh's 31 co-owners in 2005, only eight have command area land. Bara Bandh is in a dilapidated condition. In the past few decades, the Kestrapal and Namotola parties are embroiled in a conflict over rights to do fish culture in the bandh. This dispute has involved the police, bribery and two court cases. The judges declared that because the bandh's khatian (record of rights) clearly states that the two parties have joint ownership rights, the two parties should either divide the bandh in half, or take turns using it.

The effects of landholding structure on irrigation, agriculture, and ecology

The analysis of four small-scale storage works has highlighted a diversity of management outcomes that, this paper posits, have been strongly influenced by state-led changes in landholding structure. The secondary drivers of these management outcomes include population growth and the emergence of land scarcity in a context of bureaucratic ineffectiveness, minimal support and investment in agricultural systems, and a political vacuum beyond the indigenous socio-political institutions at the community level.

Land and land-based resources remain central to adivasi communities' lives and livelihoods. Households in Champi whose members work outside of agriculture, either locally or as migrants to cities and industrial areas, invest their remittances in agriculture,

¹² Recall panchayat elections were not held from 1978 to 2011.

such as by purchasing bullock carts, fertilisers, or equipment for processing and milling paddy. However many households work locally in the tough and injurious, poorly paid informal mining sector, which involves the manual breaking of rocks, and over time destruction of the rocky outcrops located in and around the villages. This business expanded due to the lack of opportunities in agriculture, but critically due to the control of village land being taken away from adivasi communities and transferred to private ownership or state 'stewardship'. Farmland expansion meant that rocky outcrops were the last bastions of forest cover, and their destruction disturbs already-pressured local ecological and hydrological systems tremendously. Between 2005 and 2010 the rocky outcrop along one side of Toppo's Bandh has been entirely deforested and mined away. Santal villagers are the workforce, while one of the Toppo brothers and the middlemen involved are the profiteers. The village environments, due to the effects of private landownership, are now greatly degraded.

Taradatt (2001) argues that the non-recognition of communal rights of adivasis in survey and settlement operations supported the separation of individual from community in matters of property relations concerning land. In addition, as argued by Mahapatra (1986), the value systems of the officers and elected representatives of modern state institutions such as the development block and Panchayati Raj are fundamentally at odds with adivasi notions of leadership. While adivasis act as mediators in village relations, seeking to maintain ecological balance in the process, officers and elected representatives are concerned with modern economic development at any cost. Control over land is central to agricultural, irrigation and ecological systems in the villages of rural Jharkhand.

Loss of control over village land and other resources, introduction of alien administrative and value systems, and the related disruption of the socio-political functioning of village communities, affects the management of irrigation systems. These factors disturb the unity that once sustained them.

These factors have also stifled the development of new storage works by farming communities. To create new storage works in a context of maximum land under cultivation, a degree of flexibility and local autonomy to determine landholding patterns and distribution is required. In the past storage works were developed when opportunities for further expansion of land still existed, and when the adivasi notion of collective rights to resources were still operational. Land could, theoretically at least, be redistributed within the lineage or community through consensual agreement. As the landholding structure exists in the present-day, it is difficult to envisage how farming communities could create storage works in optimal locations. Individuals' landholdings, in tiny parcels, are nowadays scattered across villages, the result of survey and settlement operations that reinforced the individualisation of land ownership. This largely explains why farming households and communities have developed few new storage works in the post-independence period. It also explains why large storage works, capable of providing supplemental irrigation to multiple households, have not been created by government or non-government agencies in recent decades. State schemes target individuals, so invariably relatively wealthier households manage to access such funds to build small storage works for fish culture and sometimes to irrigate their own land.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that when societal and property relations were favourable, farming communities created small-scale storage works for the supplemental irrigation of paddy. These systems nowadays face a multitude of management problems. The extant landholding structure has evolved via land revenue settlements and reforms implemented by successive governments without consideration of the indigenous forms of irrigation practised in rainfed agricultural systems. Since the 1980s there have been efforts by the government to develop new storage works, but less so to support pre-existing systems. State-led schemes for creating new storage works have targeted individuals, leading to their placement in locations ill-suited for the provision of supplemental irrigation. Renovation efforts have bypassed many pre-existing works, because they are considered to be privately owned, even though many are co-owned by multiple, often poor households. There is a need to move beyond engineering and management paradigmatic frameworks, under which knowledgeable specialists, civil and social engineers, seek to oversee the design of hydraulic infrastructure, and laws, rules and institutions respectively (Boelens et al. 2005). The creation of water harvesting structures, one every two hectares, in eastern and central India, is recommended (Phansalkar and Verma 2004, 2005). Realising the untapped potential of Indian rainfed agricultural systems through investment in supplemental irrigation is financially attractive and viable, environmentally benign, and equitable and poverty-targeted (Sharma et al. 2008).

To improve irrigation in the region, the government could provide strong inducements to farming communities as a way to indirectly invest in the development of supplemental irrigation (cf. Coward 1986). Japan's government used such a strategy: it left ownership and control in local hands, made subsidies and low-interest loans available to local groups (which generated investments that matched those of the state), and provided technical assistance to local groups (Coward 1986). The strategy was highly dependent upon the existence of strong farming groups who were able to mobilise communal labour and manage water effectively. For this, some degree of localised land reform will be required. It is doubtful that a blanket, state-level land reform would serve the purpose. However progressive land reform is highly unlikely in present-day Jharkhand (see the edited collection by Sundar 2009). In the context of adivasi-inhabited regions, it is important not to change laws that forbid transfer of land from adivasis to non-adivasis. However within adivasi communities the transfer of land should not be ruled out, and would likely be conducive to greater productivity and poverty reduction, besides improvement in socio-political relations within adivasi society. Land could be purchased (not expropriated) from non-resident households, and from households (such as khuntkatti households) who currently have excess land that is unproductively farmed. In the process of localised land reform, landless and marginal farmers could receive land parcels, and land consolidation could take place keeping in mind the optimal location for new storage works. Water reform should take place alongside land reform (Lipton 2009), which would entail all potential command area farmers gaining co-ownership rights over pre-existing storage works. To minimise further ecological destruction (that has already reached extreme proportions) the government could return to village communities control over village land deemed to be 'waste' or 'forest'. The food security challenges of

communities living in rainfed areas are already exacerbated by climate change effects, therefore new ways of understanding and transforming agriculture are urgently required.

References

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Interrogating ‘Integration’ in Adivasi Discourse: Customary vs. Democratic Institutions in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand

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Abstract

Adivasi societies have changed according to their interaction with ‘mainstream’ societies as well as their proximity to the institutions of state. Presently, there are adivasis who have not only followed the cultural practices of non-adivasis but also adopted one religion or another. Moreover, there are also forces within the adivasi society trying to avoid ‘assimilation’ by reclaiming identity. Identity politics, thus, questions the discourse of “integration” and rather looks for a framework more capable of accommodating the articulation of differences. This paper looks at the constitution of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in an adivasi society hitherto governed by customary institutions of *Manki-munda* system, as an attempt towards pursuing integration. Interrogating the ideological connotation of integration due to presumption of a given social fabric, this paper argues for discourse of ‘intersectionality’ to identify the changing power relations in adivasi society and work out a synthesis of customary and democratic values. Findings of the empirical sections can be taken as the social facts to be considered while framing a law for local governance in scheduled areas. The paper is based on a primary survey conducted through focus group discussions in the district of West Singhbhum.

Introduction

‘Tribe’¹ is a British construct of the 19th century for the ‘indigenous’ people or *adivasis* earlier known as *janas* (Xaxa 1999: 1519). The *janas* connoted an identity framed against the attributes of the *jatis* and were thought to be living more or less isolated life in close vicinity of nature fulfilling their needs (Xaxa 1999: 1519). Although the attributes of tribes were identified by the British, they were regarded as ‘un-civilised’ and the latter took upon themselves the task of civilising them. In post-independent India, the State adopted the role of a guardian for its entire population and took the responsibility for their development. The issue of tribal development and administration started the debate about the nature of process to be followed. Nehru’s advisor on tribal affairs, Verrier

¹ In this paper the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘adivasi’ are used intermittently despite the awareness of the connotation which they carry. While the former is more so an official term used for administrative purposes, the latter is embedded in the ideology of indigeneity and carries the notion of identity and culture.

Elwin, who initially advocated the policy of 'isolation' later conceded in favour of 'integration' (Guha 2000: 262) ruling out Ghurye's 'assimilation'.² Integration was adopted as the virtuous middle-path with the intent of safeguarding the 'identity and culture' of the adivasis while integrating them with the 'mainstream'. Affirmative policies of reservation in state jobs and reservation of seats in parliament and state legislature along with autonomy in self-governance became the means of achieving integration.

Presently, adivasis constitute around 8 per cent of the total Indian population (Census 2011). Concentrated mainly in central, eastern and north-eastern part of India, adivasis are scattered all over the geographical space of the country. Although not in a majority in any of the central Indian states, they have substantial population in Chhatisgarh (32%), Jharkhand (27%) and Odisha (22%) (Census 2011). But unlike Chhatisgarh or Odisha, Jharkhand has the distinction of being governed by tribal leaders since its formation on November 15th 2000. Credit for this can be given to the seven decades long Jharkhand movement veering around political self-determination of the adivasis. However, having tribal leaders at its helm for the last thirteen years has not improved the condition of adivasis in Jharkhand as they still languish in poverty like their counterparts elsewhere. Large-scale migration in the wake of displacement or search of jobs owing to loss or lack of livelihood, bureaucratic corruption hindering the percolation of welfare measures, problem of elite capture of opportunities and several other reasons may be held accountable for the backwardness of the tribals. While accepting the role of these factors for tribal under-development, this paper revisits the rationale of legislation like Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act (henceforth JPRA), 2001 in pursuing integration, in general, and local development, in particular.

Constitution of statutory panchayats is not something new to the scheduled areas of Jharkhand. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 1948 gram panchayats had been established on a statutory basis in Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas (Troisi 1978: 152). But as the adivasis were alien to elections, their participation in the panchayat elections was minimal (Troisi 1978: 155). As a result, in most of the gram panchayats in Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas the *Mukhias* and the *Sarpanchs* were non-tribals. There were also leadership conflicts between the adivasis and non-adivasis and discontent among the customary adivasi leaders. Troisi says that,

....the traditional councils were considered as a means of fostering group consciousness, the new government institutions are looked upon as a force that is disintegrating the tribal village solidarity. (Troisi 1978:154)

While the discontent against panchayat elections dates back to the earlier period a new political landscape where the adivasis are more assertive than earlier provides them a better opportunity to express their identity and culture.

² Assimilation as a policy was to be based on Ghurye's belief that the tribals were the 'backward Hindus'. N K Bose also elaborated upon the process of tribal assimilation into Hindu religion and cited the caste-based expertise in production to fulfill increasing needs of the tribals as the reason behind their integration.

Ever since the panchayat elections were conducted in 2010, incongruence between the customary institutions of *manki-munda*³ and PRIs has revealed itself in the day-to-day interactions. A situation has emerged which has rather posed a challenge before adivasi society either to find a way towards re-structuring itself in accordance with ‘modern’ ethos of democracy or strive to sustain the ‘tradition’ at the cost of its own peril. While several attributes from ‘tradition’ are worth preserving, changing society (and the discriminatory practices in customary system) entails the need to adopt democratic institutions. Taking examples from West Singhbhum of Jharkhand, I would like to state that the ‘single-axis’ ideology of ‘integration’ fails to consider social inequalities and power relations in the adivasi society. The paper tries to capture the dynamics of adivasi society by showing how the assertion of individual ‘self’ has made a visible dent in the communitarian and egalitarian perception about adivasi society.

Grounded in the assumption that the adivasi societies are open to outside influences and its members are also engaged in contest for power the present paper is divided into five sections, including the introduction. Second section highlights the limitations of ‘integration’ as a discourse to govern the adivasis due to its inability to engage critically with power relations in an adivasi society. It also provides a review of literature covering the framing of adivasi life and society in the present context. This is followed, in the third section, by a brief introduction of ‘intersectionality’ as both a theory and a methodological tool and its relevance in analysing the differences in adivasi society. The penultimate section gives the field experiences regarding the limitations of both customary and panchayati institutions in ensuring development at local level through local self-governance. Finally, the hand-out concludes by providing a brief summary of the existing under-development and social divisions.

Research Methodology

High voting percentage (around 63 per cent) in the panchayat elections of West Singhbhum went along with side-by-side protests against it. These two contradictory trends made one thing clear that there were people supporting either the panchayat elections or the customary institutions. However, it also raised the challenge of capturing an unbiased opinion of the people regarding the two institutions. Keeping in view the political situation in the villages, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)⁴ were used to record both the narratives and counter-narratives from the respondents. Fifteen FGDs were conducted in twelve different blocks of West Singhbhum. In each such meeting, around 20-30 respondents turned up out of which only fifty per cent participated actively. Whereas some of the FGDs comprised both male and female participants, few were attended entirely by male and, interestingly, one of the meetings was attended by only female members. The villages were selected randomly as the customary institution as

³ Manki-munda are the customary heads of village and *pir*, i.e. a group of villages, respectively in a *Ho* tribal society.

⁴ FGDs are generally conducted to take the public opinion on some phenomenon or events which influence all of them. In her study of Customary Village Councils (CVCs) in Karnataka, Kripa Ananthpur conducted several FGDs to take a note of people’s opinion on the salience and limitations of customary institutions as well as PRIs.

well as the PRIs existed in all the blocks. However, care was taken so that geographically entire district is covered.

Apart from this, personal interview was conducted with the customary leaders of the village, i.e. *mundas* and the panchayat representatives. Political leaders from the area like members of legislative assembly (MLA), former-MLAs and leaders of certain organisations like *Kolhan Raksha Sangh*, *Gram Ganhrajya Parishad*, *Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Mahasabha*, *Adivasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha* and *Manki Munda Sangh* were also interviewed. Semi-structured questionnaire was followed for the purpose of FGD, while the personal interviews were un-structured and done with the intent of understanding the respondents' opinion on the matter of society, economy and politics, at large.

Revisiting 'integration': Framing adivasi life and society through literature

Using the term 'integration' in context of tribes first require an understanding of tribe itself. Attempt by the British to disentangle otherwise co-existing tribe and caste during the 19th century led to unforeseen consequences in the Indian society. Beteille says that:

Ethnographic material from India did not figure prominently in the general discussion regarding the definition of tribe. The problem in India was to identify rather than define tribes, and scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones. This is not to say that those engaged in drawing up lists of Indian tribes did not have their own conception of tribe, but those conceptions were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied (Beteille 1986: 299).

Policy makers in India largely take evolutionary approach in defining tribes and view them in a dichotomy with either the State or religion and caste. This has led to the negligence of tribal aspect which Godelier (1977 as quoted in Beteille 1986) defined in terms of existence of a type of society with certain stage of evolution. Taking the historical approach, however, Beteille disregards the stage of evolution as an issue in identifying or defining tribes and considers only the fact that they existed outside state and civilisation (Beteille 1986: 316). In order to get over the dichotomous analysis of tribe either in comparison to caste and religion or state the anthropologists in India use the term 'tribe in transition' to capture the dynamics of tribal society (Beteille 1986: 316).

Another definitional aspect is related to tribal identity and traces the change in the defining agency. Xaxa (2005: 1363) states that in the early post-independent years identity formation among the tribes was 'a process from without' where non-tribals were largely active. However, in the recent times it has become 'a process directed from within' spearheaded by a growing middle class from the community. Thus, tribes in India can be identified as groups living simultaneously under the authority of both state and community where the latter is gradually conceding space for the former. Nevertheless, the encroachment of communal sphere is not without conflicts based on identity defined in terms of customs and traditions and articulated exclusively in comparison to 'others'. The protests against the panchayat elections in West Singhbhum are indicative of this fact.

Further, on adivasi integration Beteille (1986: 309) states that historical records suggest 'integration at the top' whenever tribal kingdoms were established following Hindu model. Usually, the tribal leaders started practicing Hinduism which was followed by the subjects. He also argues that 'integration at the bottom' must have also taken place

through force of economic circumstances making the tribals enter the larger division of labour (Beteille 1986: 309). Existence of non-advasis in the villages of West Singbhum for their symbiotic existence approves of this logic. However, despite the integration of the tribals during medieval times their identity and culture was never threatened though certain homology can be found if we compare tribals with individual castes (Beteille 1986: 310-311). Xaxa (1999, 2005) also approves this view and argue that just because the tribals follow social practices similar to that of Hindus or other religion they cannot be identified as Hindu or other religion.

Identifying the problem with policy-making, Xaxa (1999:1520) asserts that the tribals are still perceived through the established anthropological works. It is assumed that they are moving towards absorption in the caste or religious groups due to unavoidable forces of civilisation. Whereas in reality there is more complex scenario with the tribals perceiving themselves as community with their notion of religious and cultural identity (Xaxa 2005: 1363). But Xaxa in his assertion looks at the middle class adivasi group as the agency responsible for creating this 'identity' and fails to confirm whether the same belief is upheld by the common adivasis. Thus, the problem with both the discourse of integration and Xaxa seems to be the same. Both have overlooked the dynamics within the adivasi society and failed to identify the power relations existing between them.

Another method of integration, called 'state formation' is supposed to have provided the decisive socio-political framework for the transformation of the tribal system through participaton in official practices like elections, development projects and so on (as quoted in Xaxa 1999:1520). Scholars (Shah 2010) have stated that the tribals in Jharkhand participated in state-conducted elections to 'keep the state away' and preserve their customary institutions through sacral politics. However, we can see that the tribals have selectively chosen to receive benefits from the state because policy of economic integration through reservation of jobs was never questioned. In fact, there are instances of 'retribalisation' through which communities like *Kurmi-Mahato* in Jharkhand and *Gujjars* in Rajasthan are agitating to gain Scheduled Tribe status (Beteille 1986: 318). And even when the tribals strive to 'keep the state away' it is not always the mandate of the entire community (Shah 2010; Chandra 2013).

Further capturing the changes brought in tribal societies due to policy of integration, Nathan and Kelkar (2003, 1955) stated that the socio-economic system of the tribals has moved from one based on stability and self-consumption to one based on accumulation and market-orientation. They argue that although accumulation was inhibited in many tribal groups its denouncement by the Christians as 'pagan' rites made the tribals switch over to accumulation (Kelkar 2003, 1955)). But the authors fail to bring here the case of affirmative policies which played a bigger role in creating the tribal elite and growing inequality in the community. Thus, initial subscription to integration itself has aggravated the social inequalities. Nathan and Kelkar, however, provide ample example showing how a value has grown among a section of the mainstream which wants to draw a very cosmetic picture of the tribals and even engage in practices which incentivise the transformation of cultural practices of tribal community into commodities (Kelkar: 1959).

Despite all these changes observed in the tribal society, belief is gaining ground that even if civilisational practices like changing mode of production and modern lifestyle is being practised by them they still are the 'others' of mainstream society (Xaxa, 1999).

Articulation of selective attributes like identity and self-determination is now being claimed through movements (Xaxa, 1999). All this is happening amidst the fact that adivasi societies are heterogeneous and all the tribals do not perceive the State similarly. Their action ranges from complete alienation and armed resistance to strategic use of accruing political benefits. As analysed later in this paper, nature of protest against the panchayat election itself is a testimony to the fact that there are wide fissures within the tribal society.

It can therefore be seen that the present tribal discourse is a result of the structural limitations in the policies adopted to govern the tribes as well as attempt at modernising the State in terms of 'development'. Policy of 'integration' aimed at protecting identity and culture had no relevance when the community itself was uprooted and rendered destitute. Furthermore, integration as a policy is itself criticised for being 'underpinned by binary and essentialised constructions of the social divisions' (Anthias 2013: 323-29). Anthias argues that integration is an ideological notion with purported movement of one society towards a given social fabric and any attempt to describe it as a two-way process with 'responsibilities on both new arrivals and established communities' is considered as more rhetorical than real (Anthias 2013: 323-29). Due to the limitations which the notion of integration suffers scholars have attempted to find solace in 'intersectionality' for dealing with the dynamism of power relations and socio-economic inequalities in identity formation (Anthias 2013: 323-29).

Thus, the discourse of integration seems to be deficient in the governance of adivasis and incapable of addressing the matter of inequality and power relations prevailing within the adivasi groups. Assertion of identity and culture by the middle class adivasi intelligentsia has been prominently raised by scholars like Xaxa (2005) without going into the issue of intra-group heterogeneity on class basis. Analysing the adivasi issue through intersectionality may give rise to the problem of identifying an agency in the articulation of adivasi interest. But allocating that role to the middle class adivasi downplaying the power relations will surely further perpetuate the under-development of adivasis. In context of anti-dispossession struggles, framing of adivasi society on the basis of culture and identity runs the risk of putting the resistance on some imaginary edifice incapable of addressing the livelihood issues (Hebbar 2011).

The discourse of 'intersectionality' considers the social divisions to be irreducible and dialogical and provides a framework to negotiate values, meanings and practices in a globalised world thus resolving potential conflicts which do not solely revolve around cultural issues but are underpinned by power inequalities (Anthias 2013: 335-38). Chun et al (2013: 920) reveals not only that structural intersectionality is required to understand how differentiated power works but also that political intersectionality is needed to negotiate new identity formations in progressive movements. But they also agree that progressive politics do not flow from aggrieved identities and it is rather important that people derive their identities from their politics (Chun et al 2013: 937). The case study of Panchayat elections in West Singhbhum will reveal that the adivasi community also features divisive politics and attempts of articulation under identity is 'aggrieved'. This study, therefore, adopts intersectionality for analyzing the situation which emerged out of government's attempt to establish institution for self-government at local level in form of Panchayats despite presence of customary manki-munda system.

Issues of politics and power assertion in a village society

Ever since JPRA was passed it has provoked protests from different sections objecting to one or the other provisions. Apart from protests in socio-political domain the organizations resorted to 'jury politics' and JPRA was challenged also on legal grounds. The government amended the Act several times (in 2003, 2005 & 2010) to surmount the legal challenge and social discontent. But still the government is entangled in the dispute with the JPRA being sub-judice. Adivasi leaders have mainly challenged the Act on the ground of its incongruence with Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA)⁵, 1996. With reference to West Singhbhum the JPRA has several limitations. The district is recognised as a scheduled area and the customary institution existing here is known as Manki-Munda system. It is a pre-British formation and evolved indigenously according to socio-political needs of the *Ho*⁶ society. Later during the colonial era the British brought major changes in the nature, structure and function of the manki-munda system by corroborating their mode of administration with the customs of the tribals (Sen 2011: 10; 2012). This aim was achieved through the Wilkinson Rule of 1837.

In post-independent India also the customary institutions were retained through recognising colonial laws like Wilkinson Rule and Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA), 1908. Presently, *hukuk-nama* or 'formal record of rights' is issued by the district administration 'appointing' the village munda/manki to collect revenue, to act as police head for his village and maintain law and order. However, their role has diluted substantially due to introduction of police and judicial system since independence (Sundar 2005: 4431). Nevertheless, government's attempt to conduct panchayat elections according to JPRA met with protests in West Singhbhum. Due to its reservation policy, the non-tribals in Scheduled areas were not granted any seat in the Panchayat Samiti (PS) and Zila Parishad (ZP). Non-advasi organizations like *Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti* and the *Jharkhand Pradesh Panchayatiraj Adhikar Manch* (JPPAM) deriving support from OBCs (mainly Kurmi-Mahato) argued that reserving the chair's seat for adivasis in scheduled areas violates their own citizenship rights. They demanded to deschedule certain areas where they claim adivasis are in minority (Sundar 2005: 4430). Finally, an amendment was brought in JPRA on 10th October 2003 to de-reserve the posts of *up-mukhiya* in the Panchayat Samiti and Vice-Chairperson at the *Zila Parishad*.

There were also wide-spread agitations by the *Manki-Munda Sangh* and other organisations avowed to the preservation of the customary institutions. They wanted the JPRA to be brought in conformity with the PESA and favoured the retaining of customary system of governance. A wide range of organisations with varying ideologies were behind these protests. *Gram Ganhrajya Parishad* wanted a legal status for the customary institutions in accordance with their role in history. *Kolhan Raksha Sangh*, a radical political outfit has filed a case in the Supreme Court questioning the validity of Panchayat elections of 2010 and the JPRA. Manki-munda Sangh, an organisation of

⁵ PESA talks about the retaining of customary institutions and mandates the bestowing upon of several powers on gram sabha, e.g. decision on land alienation, management of minor forest produce, minor mining leases, maintenance of water bodies and so on.

⁶ Adivasi group, primarily, residing in West Singhbhum, East Singhbhum and Saraikela Kharsawan districts of Jharkhand. They can also be found in the neighbouring areas of other states. The Hos claim to be drawing their lineage from the same ancestors as the mundas.

customary leaders, has also contested the JPRA through social mobilization on various occasions.

However, their protest itself was not united and the differences became visible during the panchayat elections of 2010. Division within the ranks of the customary leaders was observed as many customary leaders fielded their family members to contest the panchayat elections. While this was done by those mundas who didn't oppose the panchayat elections even the munda who were active members of the Manki-munda Sangh hesitated to report this fissure among their own ranks to the Sangh because the two mundas were found to be relatives. Xaxa (2005) who looks at identity formation for the tribals in the recent times as 'a process directed from within' agrees that the purpose of activism is gaining political autonomy and ensuring the protection and development of tribal language, customs and culture. But the problem arises when this assertion based on identity spills over to take over issues of livelihood.

Recently, scholars have argued that the assertion in tribal politics is 'reinforcing stereotypes about tribes, thereby shifting the focus from crucial issues relating to governance and natural resources to identity and ethnicity' (Hebbar 2011: 5). This observation is quite valid as several regional political parties in Jharkhand take up the issue of displacement and land alienation under the pretext of tribal culture and identity whereas more mundane issues like livelihood lies unaddressed. It rather gives chance to the tribal elite to assert their social presence through citing custom and culture without having any relevance. For example, the customary institution of manki is not as popular as that of munda and people rarely care about their existence (Sundar 2005: 4431). However, the mankis also corroborated their interests with those of munda and argue for retaining the customary institutions. More than functionality of an institution what is embarked upon is the legitimacy which is located in the history of the region. It can be said that although the protesting mankis don't have the popular support they are embarking upon those organisations which gives priority to the identity and culture rather than strategic negotiation of mundane needs.

Although the traditional system of governance has not lost its importance completely they have substantially lost their ground due to the anomalies which have crept into their functioning. In addition to this the unfussy attribute of the tribals is a misconception. As stated earlier, the adivasis also aspire to have a lifestyle like the 'mainstream' people and engage with cultural practices according to their changed socio-economic circumstances. Adivasis living in urban dwellings no more participate in festivals and have given up the drinking of *diyng* which has cultural links as the drink is offered for propitiating the souls of ancestors. Apart from this, it also challenges the ideological apparatus of their own elites who attaches identity to specific cultural practices. And, whenever the conservativeness of the customary institutions curtail their aspirations they seek redemption in modern day institutions like courts, police, etc. The difference within the adivasi society has been brought out well by Chandra who argue that,

The adivasi community is thus not a vestige of the pristine pre-colonial past, but an artifact of the modern constitution of state and society in India with its peculiar set of intergenerational conflicts that define the nature and limits of governmentality (Chandra 2013: 58).

The next section will elaborate upon the drawbacks and advantages of the customary institutions as well as the panchayat institutions and argue for the need to synthesise both institutions in accordance with the spirit of PESA for local self-governance.

Evaluating Custom and Democracy: Experiences from the Field

As stated earlier, the lack of people's knowledge about manki speaks a lot about whether the people really strive to retain their customary institutions or they are simply mindful of the institution playing role in their daily life. Under-development in the region is testimony to the inefficiency of not only the customary institution of manki-munda but the entire political discourse claiming to be representative of the adivasis. Shrinking presence of customary institutions from the public space can be discerned from the fact that rarely was the *gram sabha* (GS) meeting held in most of the villages even for deciding upon the local developmental issues. According to the claim made by some of the villagers as well as the munda, they seemed to be alienated with the meetings because none of the projects approved through them were implemented. It was also noticed that the munda who were politically more aware and literate took more interest in conducting the GS meetings.

Throughout the FGDs widespread dissatisfaction could be observed among the people over the role of their village munda. Most of the time, the mundas were found to be unaware of their role and responsibilities allotted to them through JPRA. They conceded to the ways of mukhia and panchayat sevak⁷ and easily sanctioned their wish. Regarding the social audit the munda of a village said that the panchayat representatives asked for his signature and he did so. However, the villagers claimed that the munda was bribed by the panchayat functionaries for signing any document. They even regretted that he was not an elected person and, hence, they cannot even remove him. It can be discerned from this fact people want control over their own fate and hence, they welcomed and participated in large numbers in the panchayat elections despite voracious protests from a section.

However, it will be wrong to blame the munda entirely for the absence of gram sabha meetings. Most of the villagers never attended any GS meeting and remained occupied with daily necessities. Even the organisations which claimed to raise people's awareness about the customary institutions were found to be providing only lip service and did not indulge into proper training of the customary leaders. During one such discussion the office bearers of the *Gram Ganhraya Parishad* were accused of not divulging the information related to the welfare and governance of the people. This may be due to the incompatibility between the wish of the people and the objective of the organization itself. While the former are more concerned about the welfare schemes and livelihood measures the latter has its role embedded in the ideology of preserving customary institutions. GS roles were maintained in a cumbersome manner and sometimes the attendance register was taken to individual household for taking signature of the members.

⁷ Mukhia is the Chairman of the Panchayat and heads the meeting for annual budgeting and expenditure under a panchayat area whereas panchayat sevak is a government appointed official who assists mukhia in carrying on his assigned role

One area in which the customary institution was quite effective is the area of conflict resolution because the customary leaders were more aware of social conditions and ensure expeditious justice with fewer expenses. However, this aspect of customary institutions is also not without a taint and their dubious role is discussed ahead. The village munda is endowed with the power to hold meetings and resolve the civil cases at the village meeting. However, in matter of serious crimes the cases go to the police station. Although most of the smaller cases were resolved at the village level there were instances where civil cases were also taken to the police station. An incident questioning the reliability attached with the customary institution of munda occurred in Kondua village⁸. Munda's influential position in the village made it possible to impose harsh punishment though it is not within the ambit of the village munda. In yet another case the village munda accused the manki of indulging into graft⁹. These incidents reduce the reliability for the customary institutions in the eyes of the adivasis. But there are other areas where the customary institutions play a vital role in maintaining social cohesion.

The *munda* plays an active role in organising festivals at village level and conducts meeting to decide upon the amount of contribution to be made by each household for holding religious functions and also declare the date and time of the celebrations. Apart from this, mundas in several villages were taking active part in encouraging the villagers for voluntary labour towards construction of some damaged village roads, repairing ponds and tanks, etc. The munda in Kokarkatta village has created *Jungle Raksha Vahini* to protect the forest as well as do afforestation. Whenever someone illegally cuts the trees the volunteers stop them. The villagers working as volunteers do not received any salary from the forest department. The villagers claim that the forest cover has substantially increased due to this practice and many families depend upon the income generated out of selling forest products. Despite these mixed experiences with the customary institutions people voted heavily in the panchayat elections.

Considering huge (69 per cent) voting in the panchayat elections of West Singhbhum as a moral defeat of the protesters will be a simple reading of a complex phenomenon and different socio-political aspects need to be studied closely. The explanation provided by the munda and the people sympathetic to him for the huge voter turn-out in panchayat elections was that people were lured into voting as the contestants arranged for *diyang*¹⁰ and chicken. Another version was that a lot of bogus voting had taken place. This situation brings us to the question that whether the high voter turn-out was a sign of people's disgruntlement with the customary leaders? Or, did they exactly comprehend the role of the PRIs? Apart from few places the people did not rear grievances against the customary leaders as no social agitation was noticed in the area. In answer to the later question it may be said that the people had not voted due to their realisation that PRIs

⁸ A boy charged with molesting a girl from munda's family was fined heavily (around Rs. 30,000) and the boy's family was even asked to arrange for a social feast following tradition.

⁹ In Simbia village, the munda punished a girl and her family for beating up a woman. The accused girl denied complying with the punishment and, hence, a social boycott was imposed against the family. After a few days *teen mankis* came to resolve the issue. On this the munda said that he had not recommended the case to the customary teen manki then why did they take up the case *suo moto*. Later it was found that the accused had bribed the manki to appear in her favour.

¹⁰ A traditional alcoholic drink made by fermenting rice. Earlier used by the adivasis to propitiate the soul of ancestors and drink occasionally. But now a days it is used as cheap liquor on daily basis.

will cater to their developmental needs. The entire landscape preceding the panchayat election was politicised due to the agitation by the Manki-munda Sangh and no developmental issue dominated. Moreover, it provided opportunity to many people to become a part of 'decentralised' corrupt practices.

Even after the elections, there are instances when the munda contest the legitimacy of the mukhia¹¹ on the social terrain¹². Whereas power equations and animosity could have existed earlier between the faction supporting the munda and the mukhia the panchayat elections has provided it the opportunity to be contested openly. For sure, it may be claimed that the people were not motivated with developmental agenda during the panchayat elections. But what cannot be denied either is that a faction who contested the panchayat elections was lobbying actively for the election. However, the JPRA is framed in contradiction to the PESA, 1996 barring one provision related to the representation of women. The reservation of 50 per cent seats for women is an improvement upon the customary practices and will go a long way in ensuring their empowerment.

However, this initiative is also not without qualifiers and it was found that while some of the women representatives were active others had virtually passed on their role upon the male members of her house. Interestingly, a trend emerged wherein the women mukhia who themselves looked into the affairs of the panchayat were claimed to be more honest than their counterparts who had surrendered their role to their relatives¹³. As of the response of customary leaders towards women representatives, some of them are not only critical of the changing role of women but also go to the extent of maligning their character in front of an outsider¹⁴. This incident can be seen as in-tolerance of customary leaders towards women of their own community when it comes to distribution of political power. While issues of corruption comes up in several instances the definitely positive contribution of the panchayat elections can be regarded as the opportunity for the women to assert their equality in a society which is marked by its institutionalised discrimination towards them. The Ho women are not given the land rights and they cannot become a village munda, except in some cases (Sen 2011). Their participation in the GS is very meager and they hardly hold an opinion on any social, political or economic issue.

Despite its positive impact on women empowerment the PRIs in West Singhbhum are considered to be corrupt. Lots of irregularities were reported starting from the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

¹¹ Representatives elected through panchayat elections from group of villages.

¹² In one such case a person belonging to the below poverty line category went to the *mukhia* to claim the money (Rs.100) which he was entitled to receive in lieu of the expenses for preparing *Aadhar* (Unique ID) Card. The mukhia, however, knew that this person was loyal to the munda and denied him the money. On this there was a small scuffle after which the mukhia registered an FIR in the police station against that person. As the police require the munda's permission to investigate such issues the munda assured the person that he will take care of the issue.

¹³ The mukhia of Dudhbila and Kondua Panchayat were not only perceived as honest but were also active in protest against land acquisition by the companies in their respective areas. However, the mukhia of Noangaon and Chhota Raikela were seen as puppets by the villagers while their brother-in-law acted as the virtual mukhia.

¹⁴ The munda of Karkatta made some lewd comments about the mukhia's character. He said that many male are liberal towards the mukhia as she is still unmarried and looks beautiful. This talks a lot about the feudal and patriarchal mentality of the munda.

(MGNREGS) to even repair of tube pumps. In case of *Indira Awas Yojana*¹⁵ the munda decide upon the beneficiary in a GS conducted for this purpose from among the BPL families. However, a list is prepared by the block officials and then the exact beneficiary is ear-marked. People claimed that those who got the benefit had to pay bribes to the mukhia, panchayat sevak and the Block Development Officer. It was claimed by the beneficiaries from several villages that the mukhia had demanded bribe to allocate the benefit. In addition to this it was also noticed that many well-to-do families also got the benefit of Indira Awas Yojana. Without corrupt practices it would not have been possible. Another issue which was found was the irregularities in the spending of money allocated for repairing tube pumps and cleaning wells and ponds. It was claimed in almost all the villages that they had to do these works by voluntarily collecting money among themselves and none of the tube pumps was repaired by the mukhia. The villagers claimed that as the summers will arrive many of the tube pumps will become dry. This was due to the reason that while doing bore the contractors are asked to dig up to certain level. However, the contractors stop digging as soon as they find water and fix the tube pump. Although it works well during other seasons it stops working during the summer once the water level drops. The contractors, thus, do not dig up to the prescribed depth and spend less money than the allocated amount.

Another incident occurred in the case of Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification Programme. Under this scheme it is required that the beneficiary shall belong to BPL family. But in Kotgarh due to some anomaly in the list required numbers of BPL beneficiaries were not there. However, the electricity engineer asked the villagers to pay Rs.1200 per household and he assured them that he will put them into the BPL list. The villagers collected money among themselves and paid a part of the entire amount to the engineer. Electricity was supplied in the village although the entire amount of bribe was not paid and when the engineer insisted for the remaining payment, the person who collected the money told him that he could not raise more than this as the people were not ready to give money. Lastly, the engineer had to compromise with that amount and the electricity was provided. This incident reminds of Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak' used very subtly by the poor villagers when they encounter the power of bureaucracy.

After the panchayat elections the mukhia and panchayat sevak are the implementing authority for MGNREGS projects and they also got both central as well as state fund under Backward Region Grants Fund (BRGF). Although most of the villagers were eligible under the job guarantee scheme of MGNREGS majority of them couldn't get work under the scheme despite having the job cards. Regarding the job card it was said that after the villagers worked the contractor use to take the job card with him. There is no entry made in the card and it was claimed that the job card is used by the panchayat sevak for drawing money by forged managing of accounts. The munda also is not aware of the benefits granted under the MGNREGS and do not tell the villagers about the unemployment benefits if one does not get the job for the days guaranteed under the scheme. Thus, introduction of developmental measures has failed to percolate to the people due to corruption and lack of awareness among the people. Neither the customary institutions nor the PRIs have succeeded in providing relief to the people suffering under simmering poverty.

¹⁵ This is a housing scheme run by the Indian government targeting the poor people in rural areas.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the discourse of integration has overlooked the changes which have pervaded the adivasi society. Moreover, articulation under identity and culture to retain foothold by the customary institutions is embedded in their wish to maintain their power. At the village level, intricacies and hatred of the customary and panchayat institutions sometimes becomes public when they enter into contestation for power socially through challenging their respective roles. Nevertheless, the panchayat elections of 2010 have brought to the surface existing social divisions in the rank of the adivasis. Presently, when the customary leaders engage in judicial process to redeem their position the Panchayat representatives indulge in corrupt practices. Thus, the responsibility of under-development lies doubly on both the customary institutions as well as the panchayat representatives. Besides this, the tribal elite from the area cannot be held less accountable as they try to articulate livelihood necessities under identity and culture. The resulting under-development and social fissures needs to be seriously considered if the government wishes to work for the development of the villages.

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Interrogating 'Integration' in Adivasi Discourse

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Witchcraft, Shamanism and the Tradition of Healing among the Adivasi Societies of India

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Abstract

Belief systems and practices related to concepts of sickness, health, and 'white magic' or healing are found in all cultures worldwide. How people within a specific cultural group define health, sickness and wellness is influenced by a variety of factors. This paper will provide information regarding the various shamanistic practices followed by some of the *adivasi* communities of eastern and western India. This paper will include an ethnographic study of healing practices of those communities as well. Since the linkages between witchcraft and shamanism served almost all adivasi societies in India, this paper will also attempt to explore the scope of that linkage. Moreover, I will also try to address the issues related to 'black magic' and 'white magic' as both these practices are prevalent among the adivasi communities of India. In my present attempt however, I intend not to initiate a discussion regarding the relation between medicine and witchcraft in particular but to put forward an in-depth study on witchcraft and shamanism and its relation with the traditional form of healing as practiced by the adivasis of India.

Every form of knowledge tends to speculate on the causes of an event and discovers a method to appropriately use the event to their advantage. Medicine is no exception. Disease is as ancient as human being, and so is the desire to get rid of the disease. The early humans possessed very little knowledge of science. However, they were witness to blessings as well as curses of nature. While availability of food and shelter was considered to be a blessing, disease was seen as a curse. They came to believe that sickness is caused by an evil spirit, or a 'devil'. This is how primitive men came up with an explanation for the illness. Moreover, as they speculated that as the disease was caused by the 'devil', it could be treated by satiating the 'devil'. This seemed to have given birth to witchcraft.

It is imperative to point out that in its own way the above mentioned deduction is a complete method which binds theory with practice. This is also a perfect instance of the cause-cure linkage. The theoretical basis of the birth of witchcraft was almost similar all over the world. However, the methods adopted to appease the 'devil' varied from society to society, depending upon prevailing social practices, and availability of natural products as well as resources. Therefore, it is safe to say that the first stage of medicine was in fact the practice of witchcraft. It originated in the ancient times and it still exists today in

an altered form. Nonetheless, as Keith Thomas has pointed out that the widespread belief in witchcraft and superstition might have delayed the utilization of rational medicine (Thomas 2003). The purpose of present paper is not to initiate a discussion on the relation between medicine and witchcraft in particular, but to make an in-depth study of witchcraft and shamanism (Eliade 1987: Vol. 13, 208)¹, as the traditional form of healing practiced by the *adivasis* of India.

Drawing connections between witchcraft and shamanism were never completely unrelated to traditional constructions. Cultural anthropologists like Mc.Curdy defined shaman as a 'religious specialist who controls supernatural power' (Curdy & Spradley 1975). However, he did not mention about trance situations and about spirit controlling power of a shaman. This Michael Harner did, when he defined shaman as a 'man or woman who is in direct contact with the spirit world through a trance state and has one or more spirits at command to carry out his bidding for good or evil' (Harner 1973). Michael Howard, on the other hand, pointed out that 'the shaman's status is highly personalistic for it depends on the ability to contact and influence the spirit world rather than knowledge of sacred lore or ritual' (Howard 1996). Hoebel suggested that 'the shaman derives his presumptive power directly from a supernatural source' (Hoebel 1959: 479). Thus, shaman is a specific magico-religious specialist, who acts as a mediator during his trance period to control or direct the supernatural force to obtain a desired result. He has therefore a specific role and function for his community members. In return, the community members give him a specific status in their society.

Shamanism, on the other hand, is the behaviour or activities associated with a shaman. The reflective psychological, cultural and ritualistic states of shaman are known as shamanism. However, shamanism is itself not a religion, but rather a complex of different rites and beliefs surrounding the activities of the shaman. This connects him with the religious system. Shamanism is actually founded on a special technique for achieving ecstasy. By means of such techniques the shaman enters an altered state of consciousness and it is also believed that the shaman is accompanied by helping spirits who assist him in this state. (Eliade 1987: Vol. 13, 208).

Persons of both sexes can make a shaman. But sometimes it is found that in some communities, like the Santal and Munda tribes of eastern India, only males become a shaman. On the other hand, among the *Saoras* and very rarely among the *Koyas* and the *Khonds* both men and women can assume the role of a shaman. But in case of all the *adivasi* communities of India, the shaman must have the ability to possess and exert command over the spirit. The *Encyclopaedia of Religion* observes:

...not every magician can properly be termed as a shaman...the shaman specialized in the trance state during which his soul is believed to leave his body and to ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld and the shaman controls his helping spirits in the sense that he is

¹ The word 'shaman' is derived from the Tunguz or Russian word 'shaman (xaman)'. A theory was put forward in the nineteenth century that the word is derived from the Pali word 'samana', Sanskrit 'sramana' and Chinese 'Sha-man' meaning a special type of magico-religious specialist in general, who can control the supernatural forces. A number of social/cultural anthropologists have suggested that the word stands for 'an individual endowed with supernatural power to heal or one who can call his spirit to find out what is beyond time and space.'

able to communicate with the dead, demons and nature spirits without thereby becoming their instrument (Eliade 1987: Vol. 13, 208).

In most of the cases, the male-shaman acts as the controller of anti-evil spirits and plays the role of a witch-doctor. During spirit possession or trance state, he detects the evil power or witch. Pfeffer and Behera point to the fact that the adivasi shamans also have some hidden formulae and methods which distinguish them from a priest or a religious specialist. According to them, 'The important distinction between a shaman and another religious specialist such as a priest is that the shaman is not himself the actor but is merely the medium for the supernatural spirit that performs the acts' (Pfeffer and Behera 1997).

In some adivasi communities, a shaman sometimes acts as the physician. The adivasi groups of eastern, more specifically north-eastern India, believe that each person has more than one soul, and if one of them is lost then that person will be seriously ill, until the shaman restores the lost soul to the patient (Sarkar 1994). This is also more or less true about other parts of Asia (Eliade 1987: Vol. 13, 212). Moreover, since shamans serve as a vehicle for communication with the supernatural, the community shows respect to him out of the feeling of fear or awe. This isolates the adivasi shaman from the general people.

As I have mentioned earlier, the linkages between witchcraft and shamanism served adivasi societies. Riane Eisler pointed out that in Europe since witches were considered to be traditional healers, witch-accusations represented a move by church-trained male physicians to prevent these women from healing. Moreover, it is also observed that since the witch-rites, such as witches' Sabbaths in the woods, represented remnants of a gender dominated and led earlier pagan religion, witch accusations and hunts became church sponsored weapon to undermine the position of women by discrediting and suppressing these beliefs (Eisler 1987). Ehrenreich and English also confirm that witch-hunting in medieval Europe has been linked to the attempt of men to professionalise and monopolise the tradition of healing by taking it out of the hands of non-professional women (Ehrenreich and English 1973). In the following section of this article, I shall explain how in different adivasi societies women's shamanistic roles have been curtailed by their male counterparts through the accusations of witchcraft.

Evidence from early missionary reports and colonial officials suggest that in the past the adivasis of India, especially in the Chotanagpur and Bastar regions of east and central India as well as western India, suffered from a wide range of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, smallpox, pneumonia, dysentery, worm infestation, eye infection and various skin complaints (O'Malley 1910; 1917; 1926; Elwin 1991). The myths and legends of these adivasis also reveal that they suffered from a wide range of ailments, endemic as well as epidemic, in the past (Bodding 1927). Hardiman pointed out that there was a devastating epidemic of cholera during a severe famine in 1900 and many died from influenza in 1918 (Hardiman 2011). This undermines the argument put forward by some historians that the adivasis were in the past protected from many diseases due to their physical isolation. But the missionary sources contend this view and point to considerable ongoing communication and trade between the plains regions and the hilly tracts of east, central and western India. Even then, they were largely left to their own devices when they fell ill. This prompted them to seek cure through a range of

endogenous practices. Most popular was that carried out by relatives and neighbours using herbal and other folk treatments. However, if a sickness persisted for more than a day or two, they approached a ritual specialist, the shaman, variously named in India as *ojha*, *janguru*, *bhagat*, *buvo*, *bhopa*, *jia*, *negi*, *hikmi*, etc. They resorted to herbal remedies, cauterization, divination and exorcism. They were generally found skillful in the use of various herb, root, tree or animal products in healing, which they extracted from the plant from the forest. Therefore, a herbal preparation was seen not merely as a 'natural' medicine for an illness located in the physical world but a remedy that possessed numerous qualities that might be endowed with benign power through ritual. The duality was seen in other forms of treatment (especially in western India), such as cauterization of the sight of the pain, applied with a red-hot iron (Hardiman 2011). The rationale was that as the malign spirit responsible for this problem feared fire, this would drive it away. Exorcism, also carried out by these healers, performed the same function. It was assumed that invisible forces or spirits, affecting the lives of the living, pervaded the world. These forces were 'Janus-faced', being both benign and malign in differing proportions (Hardiman 2011).

In western India, bhagats were important figures in the adivasi society (also known in and around Mewar as *bhopas* or *badzvas*). They had different specializations, including the 'comparatively harmless practice of selling charms, prescribing remedies' (Skaria 1977). Ordinary cures could also be carried out by anyone with knowledge of herbs. In more difficult cases, the bhagat supplied both herbs and the spells to make them effective (Patel 1901). Some of them were village priests, maintaining contact with spirits and deities. This usually involved making sacrifices of fowls, goats or liquor at the stone or teak post deities outside the village during festivals, as well as performing propitiatory rites when misfortunes befell individuals or the village (Patel 1901). Yet other bhagats, some-times called *kajalio badvas* or black priests, specialized in finding *dakans* (witch). They were in all cases male as women were seen to be ritually polluting. They understood their work as a form of devotion to their deities, describing it as their *bhakti*. They believed that they were divinely granted their skills and power.

There could be several ways in which a person started out on the route to becoming bhagat through dreams of particular deities or the possessions of a person by specific deities of healing, death and divination. They subsequently had to serve an apprenticeship under an existing bhagat, honing their knowledge of plants and forms of treatment. In the adivasi world of western India, any male could potentially acquire such skills. They practice their craft in an ethically circumscribed and disciplined way which involved periodic fasting, abstention from sex and alcohol and a general avoidance of any conspicuous accumulation of wealth. Although they possessed considerable influence and power within their own societies, colonial officials, missionaries and the western-educated Indian elites were invariably unsympathetic towards them. They characterized their healing practices as being based on superstition and a wrong understanding of disease. The missionaries started depicting them as 'witchdoctors' or 'wizards' and often depicted them as their most difficult opponents (Hardiman 2008).

In the Dang region² of western India, two forms of magical aggressors occupy the central stage- the male witch, or *dakanio* and the female witch or the *dakans*. According to the anthropologist Y.V.S. Nath, though *dakanios* are trained to be priests, they generally lack ‘the stability of character so essential for a true priest’. Such persons are generally prepared to aid anybody in their personal feuds for a monetary consideration (Nath 1960). On the other hand, the *dakans* are considered to be absolutely dangerous in nature. According to Nath, possession by a specific kind of spirit, the *jogani* or female vampire, turns a woman into a *dakan*. According to local legends, ‘*dakans* call a man by his personal name when he is travelling through a jungle at night. If he responds, it means illness or any other calamity’. Ajay Skaria pointed out that two factors above all appear to have influenced the position of these various practitioners of magical aggression, firstly, the implications of their practices for different social groups and secondly, the extent to which their violence was reciprocal or gratuitous. By both criteria, the activities of *bhagats* and witch-hunters were usually quite unproblematic. They acted for the benefit of the community in its broadest possible sense, including almost all social groups. The mystical aggression of hunters secured subsistence, while the *bhagat* (who was almost always male) was central to *adivasi* social and spiritual life (Skaria 1999). It is a noteworthy fact that even though both the *bhagat* and the *dakan* were practitioners of magic, the *bhagats* were considered to be the medicine-men of the society and therefore their brand of magic was usually termed as ‘white magic’. The witch or *dakan*, on the other hand, was almost always seen as a source of evil and therefore a practitioner of ‘black magic’.

Skaria further maintains that since every woman was considered a potential *dakan* and no man was, the idea of gratuitous violence was evidently isomorphous with that of femininity. This profoundly gendered nature of gratuitous violence has its root in the ambiguous position of women in nineteenth-century *adivasi* society. On one hand, *adivasi* women were otherwise in a much superior position, especially in comparison with neighbouring plains societies. They played the principal role in subsistence activities, like fishing and foraging, an equal role in shifting cultivation, and a small role in hunting as well (Skaria 1999: 131). In comparison to most surrounding plains societies, *adivasi* women could exercise a greater degree of autonomy in the choice of their husbands, in abandoning their husbands, or in marrying again. Ritually too they occupied a significant role. At several key agricultural festivals, women played a more crucial role than that of women in the surrounding plains societies. Even then, they were still marginal and subordinate in the *adivasi* society. Their control over land was limited (Skaria 1999). In the ritual sphere too, the presence of women was considered harmful and polluting in *adivasi* communities of western India.

This was why women were castigated as *dakans* and witches. While we notice killings of *dakans* in the adjoining plains societies as well, the negative attitude to women were far more marked in *adivasi* societies. In the words of Skaria, ‘the marginality of plains’ women made charges of being *dakans* less plausible’ (Skaria 1999). Among the *adivasis* of western India, the image of women as *dakans* was simultaneously an

² The Dangs comprised of several small states in the hilly region between Surat and Khandesh (presently in Gujarat) consisting of two *adivasi* communities-the Bhils and Koknis.

acknowledgement of their power and a reflection on the fundamental illegitimacy of that power. This duality puts reciprocal and gratuitous violence in a different light. By depicting women as practitioners of gratuitous violence and by treating them all as potential dakans, they vehemently criticized the female exercise of power. This was also one of the reasons why the witch-hunters, bhagats as well as the crowds involved in the witch trials were specifically male. Their sole motive was directed towards reinstating a rightful moral order in which any form of magical aggression by women (whether as a shaman or as a dakan) would no longer be considered legitimate. Skaria remarks that this is predominantly the reason why 'the vision of the enraged was a specifically masculine vision' (Skaria 1999).

In case of central and eastern India, Verrier Elwin talks about Saora woman's shamanism, who as custodians of black magic had unrivalled knowledge of plants (Elwin 1955: 148). Elwin further states that,

... it is in the treatment of the sick that the shamanin, or the female shaman finds her greatest scope and fulfillment. Her methods of diagnosis and cure are varied and ingenious-she uses the fan and the lamp, the bow and the sword, handfuls of rice and pots of wine. Now she dances in ecstasy, now lies lost to the world in trance. When she has found the cause of disease or tragedy, she is at infinite pains to heal the wounds; she sucks infection from her patient's body, burns it with flashes of gunpowder, bites and kisses it, massages it to expel the evil, orders the sacrifice of goat or buffalo, speaks healing and consoling words (Elwin 1955: 148).

The Saora shamanin worked ceaselessly, being inspired by pride in her profession and love for the adivasi community she serves. However, here male shamans outnumbered their female counterparts and they possessed the special power to catch the witches. According to Elwin,

...a sorceress (witch) can work directly, without the need of an intermediary or agent. If she can find some of the hair-clippings, or spittle, or nail pairings of a child she can use them to its harm. She can send magic with a hen's egg or with bones stolen from a pyre or with rice and chillies (Elwin 1955: 148).

The male shamans could catch these witches through their supernatural abilities and could also reduce or in some cases completely eradicate the cause of the harm inflicted by the witch. The Saoras claim that the techniques employed by the shaman remain invisible. They believe that the shamanistic methods are very much real because these can smell the evil object (which was previously inserted into the victim's body by the witch through black-magic) and destroy it by his special brand of white magic. What is unique to the Saora community is that Saora shamans can be both men and women (shamanin), while female shaman is never heard of in any other adivasi community of India.

In the Bastar³ region of central India, the incidence of witch accusations seems limited, especially compared to that among Santhals in eastern India, where the frequency of the practice has been much greater. According to Elwin, 'in the untouched Muria tradition,

³ The Bastar region was originally a princely state in central India (now a part of Chhattisgarh) where adivasi communities like *Baiga*, *Birhor*, *Gond* and *Kol* reside.

the enemy of mankind is usually a man; belief in female witches and the evil eye of women are generally a later and Hindu accretion to the old beliefs' (Elwin 1977). However, in a number of adivasi myths or folktales from different groups in central India recorded by Elwin himself, women are portrayed as winners in the contest with men over the acquisition of the arts of witchcraft and magic. This is why cultural descriptions or tropes for witchcraft are generally associated with women. Many of the beliefs associated with female witches appear to have certain commonalities with an underlying stratum of beliefs that stretch not only across India but parts of Asia and Europe too (Ginzberg 1983; Murray 1921; Trevor Roper 1967; Levack 1992).

Female witches are ascribed the power to make men impotent or prolong women's menstrual periods (Elwin 1955). They also possess in-depth knowledge of medicinal roots, plants and herbs that can cause long lasting diseases. Male witches, by contrast, do not drink blood but they cast minor spells and therefore are considered less dangerous than the female ones. But this is difficult to ascertain whether this emphasis on female nocturnal wanderings, thirst for blood, and ability to affect reproductive organs is due to a deep-rooted misogyny prevailing in different cultures or a product of cultural flows. Also, 'eating' the victim is associated with both sexes. In the myths recorded by Elwin, eating the flesh of the first possessor of magic knowledge is a common source of the power to both heal and cause harm. Possibly, as Comaroff and Comaroff argue in the South African context, 'eating' someone or destroying their reproductive capabilities is an obvious metaphor for exploitation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). In Bastar, it is common to find a round red ball-like fruit called *bhendra phal* hung over doorways to ward off evil spirits and witches. Another precautionary measure involves sticking an arrow in a heap of grain lying on the threshing floor to ward off evil spirits. A line is drawn around the whole area for the same purpose. Similarly, villages protect themselves by having a *pujari* (priest) who drives iron nails around the boundary of the village or by other such rituals.

For a specific suspicion of witchcraft, one needs a series of illnesses or unnatural accidents, not just ordinary misfortunes. In many cases, those suspected of having special powers are treated as ordinary members of the village community till a series of incidents makes it possible to lay the blame on them, or till they become weak in some ways and are no longer feared (Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang). Given a cosmology in which the problem could also be attributed to unsatisfied deities or evil spirits functioning on their own, one also needs a co-operative *siraha* (the shaman as he is commonly named in that region) and some particular tension-fault along which suspicions could be articulated. The *siraha* goes into a trance and diagnoses the cause. Sometimes the distress may be caused by an unappeased goddess, in which case sacrifices are required, while in other cases, the *siraha* may identify a person and her evil spells as the cause (Elwin 1991). Nandini Sundar points out that when a person died inexplicably, four *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) or *saja* (*Terminalia tomentosa*) leaves were placed in a line on the way to the burial or burning ground, in the name of the Supreme Being, household deity, other deity, and witchcraft. The village *pujari* or *siraha* asked the corpse to point to the cause of death, and in turn it impelled the bearers of the pall to pause in front of one of the leaves. If they paused before the fourth leaf (representing witchcraft), the *pujari* or *siraha* again asked the corpse to point out the witch, and the body was carried along until it halted before someone in the crowd or was carried to a particular house. After the suspected witch had

been caught, she was subjected to various forms of ordeals and punishment (Sundar 1997). Thus, in Bastar too the cult of sympathetic magic or white magic as practiced by the male *sirahas* is powerful since their rites are performed for the benefit of individuals.

The Oraon adivasi community of central India in particular distinguishes between good magic and black magic. The magic intended to produce evil is known as bad or black magic, and when the same is used for good purpose this is known as good or white magic. A person who deploys magic for the benefit of the society is socially recognized as *baiga*, *dewair*, or *ojha*. Oraon believe that *baiga* or the shaman, always a male member of the community, is endowed with special powers that can neutralise the anti-social activities of a witch. His magic is regarded as useful as long as he does not apply it to harm others or to avert the evil caused by witch or any other malevolent power. The power of *baiga* is neither hereditary nor inborn, but is acquired through training publicly (Roy Vol. 44, 1914). A *baiga* does not remain confined to his own village but may go anywhere when summoned. The influence of Hinduism on *baiga* institution is very much evident by the fact that many of the *mantras* are borrowed from Hindu religion. Even *baigas* worship many Hindu deities. As *baiga's* post is not hereditary, anybody from society can become a *baiga*. To become a disciple, the person has to perform some initiation rites. He offers fowl, *kalash* (earthen-ware), and rice-beer to *mahadev* (Shiva of Hindu mythology) and worships him. During training period under a recognized *baiga*, the disciples gather either at their *guruji's* (teacher) house or at any lonely place where they are taught various *mantras*, charms and art of exorcism. They also learn about certain medicines. The training includes various songs, dances and methods of spirit-possession (Roy Vol. 44, 1914).

Like other adivasis, though aware of natural cause of diseases, Oraons believe that some diseases and misfortunes are result of evil agencies. Rather, the treatment of disease purely depends upon the perception of the disease. When a person falls sick and his family members think that disease is caused by any supernatural agency, they call a *baiga*. First, after asking very general questions like for how long the patient has been ill, he diagnoses the illness by feeling pulse of the patient. After this, he asks patient or his family members to bring *arwa*-rice (de-husked rice). He puts the rice on a *saal* leaf marked with *sindoor* (vermillion) and *haldi* (turmeric). He reads the rice on *saal* leaf with chanting of *mantras* to ascertain whether a *bishahi* or any other malevolent agency may have caused the illness. Once it is identified, sacrifices are made accordingly. (Sinha and Banerjee 2004). In case of evil eye of a *bishaha* (a female witch), *baiga* in a *khappar* (roof-tile) containing burning coal adds *dhoop-dhoan*. He revolves the *khappar* around the patient's body with one hand, and with other he throws spelled *arwa* rice on the victim for three times. During this process, he recites many *mantras* to drive away the supposed cause of evil. If disease is serious, offering and sacrifices of sweets, rice beer, fowl, goat or pig are made at home or nearby river stream. *Baiga* also performs exorcism to ward off evil spirits or evil eye. Then, he rotates *chukba-pankh* (peacock feather) around the body with chanting of 'mantras'. He also buries enchanted herbs, ash and iron nail at the entrance of the victim's house to ward off evil spirits. (Sinha and Banerjee 2004). There are several other methods used by *baiga* to find out the cause of disease and to cure a patient, counteract witchcraft and other types of misfortunes. Apart from consulting *baiga*, Oraons have developed different methods to protect themselves from evil powers either by mimetic magic or by taking help of benevolent powers.

The belief in black magic or witchcraft is widely prevalent in the Oraon society. There is a strong fear in potent powers of a witch as a source of misfortunes and disease both to individuals and community. They are believed to cause harm to animals, property, agricultural land and grains. Among Oraons, though men and women can become *bisahi*, references to female bisahis are more frequent. Most of the female witches are reported to be old women or childless women. Witches are said to have inborn powers, this trait is not considered hereditary. Oraons believe that witches can often cause harm through the use ash of cremation ground, chicken bone, lizard, cat's faeces, chanted rice, *urad* pulse, mustard seeds, grains bundled in a cloth. Witches also have knowledge of poisonous herbs, which they use to kill their victims (Gupta 1960). Oraon people believe that a witch has an evil eye that may exhaust a full granary and destroy good harvest. By using supernatural powers a witch can kill anybody within a specified period or harm the victim by the mere uttering of victim's name and invocation of spell over name. (Roy 1928).

The Oraons think that only female witches can cause disease and misfortunes. But they generally do make covert accusations to avoid tension between members, as it affects the solidarity of the group. After witchcraft is confirmed by a baiga, the help of whole community is sought since witch is seen as a menace to whole society. Witchcraft accusations are mostly made on widows to deprive them of their property. These are also associated with personal jealousy and envy, particularly when a person acquires more wealth and prestige in society. The reasons, why only witches and not wizards are punished with a high degree of cruelty, have a wide social perspective. Since indigenous societies value social solidarity and homogeneity, anything that threatens it is branded as anti-social, and so punitive. But more pertinent question is why are women considered more anti-social than men. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that men fear that such power can make or mar the future of men, particularly threaten their control over land and agriculture, as also medicinal and magical power of male shamans. (Sachchidananda 1960). The power of the witch is considered to be a mysterious power of the female principle, the ideology of the social system called the mother's right (Mullick 2003).

The Gond and the Bhumia adivasis of central and eastern India also believe in the magical powers of their shamans called the *gunia* (soothsayer) and the *padna* (magician) who are believed to possess superhuman powers through the assistance rendered to them by some supernatural force. According to Fuchs,

The soothsayer's task is to diagnose a case, to play the intermediary between the man and the superhuman powers by revealing to the clients what exactly these invisible powers demand from them (Fuchs 1960).

The *gunias* on the other hand are experts in snake exorcism which they do by invoking the songs dedicated to *thakurdeo* (Fuchs 1960). Both the *gunia* and *padna* are exclusively male members of the adivasi community and they also specialize in catching witches. Among the Panri Bhuiyas four classes of magicians who are nothing but male shamans are found. They not only ward off the 'evil' spirits but also control them and employ them in their service for the preservation or enrichment of life. The Kharias on the other hand classify their occult practices into two distinct categories- *deona* or diviner who practices good magic whereas the *dain-bisaha* or witch are purveyors of black magic. Roy concludes that the *deona* among the Kharias are always male while the *dain-bisaha* are those women who possess extensive knowledge of the forest produces using which

they could do immeasurable harm to the society (Roy 1937). All these specialists undergo some kind of training under the guidance of some adepts. The training and all sorts of 'modus-operandi' of the witchcraft or sorcery are also done in secret.

Griffiths has given an exhaustive account of the religious practices of Kol tribe of India. According to him, 'Kol religion and magic are inextricably mixed so that it is hard to say where one begins and the other leaves off' (Griffiths 1946). He has very lucidly described witchery of the Kols and depicts how the witches who are in most cases women 'are able to cast spells which reach far beyond the range of normal powers and are able to work havoc against whomever they are directed' (Griffiths 1946). Moreover, the Kols also believe in the 'evil-eye', which is known to many primitives as *nazar*, that may strike a person 'like a bullet'. To detect the evil spirit, the Kols practiced some divination when the Kol shaman, also called the *baiga* is summoned. Even the Hindus who live in the Kol neighbourhood consult them in every crisis, whether for imparting fertility to a barren woman, success in an intrigue, ripening of the harvest, recovery of stolen goods etc. Elwin also notes that,

'...the *baiga* charms are necessary for the growth of the crops, the potency of bridegroom, the frustration of the witches, the protection of the village against bears and tigers' (Elwin 1955).

Hunter noted that in the region surrounding Gangpur as well as in the tributary *mahals* there were alleged existence of secret witch-schools where Kol women were instructed in the black art and perfected in it by practice on forest trees (Hunter 1877: 55). In Gangpur there were old women professors of witchcraft who stealthily instructed young girls. They were not considered proficient till a fine forest tree, selected to be experimented on, was destroyed by the potency of their 'mantras' or charms. (Hunter 1877: 195). Thus, among the Kols too there was a strong belief which indicates that the knowledge of the black art belonged to women in general. This secret knowledge, the women's power to heal as well as harm, was beyond men, which in turn gave superiority to women. Therefore, in order to counter and subordinate women both socially and economically and to establish male domination in the society, adivasi men built a parallel system of belief, a different ideology of life, expressed in different ideas and institutions, like the institution of male-shamans. Thus, in most adivasi societies of India systems of belief are predominantly masculine. The 'supreme god' is usually presented as a male in the origin myth of these societies and men in general also hold the institution of priesthood. Women are not allowed to participate in their religious rites.

The Santals of eastern India on the other hand have a deep rooted belief that every woman is a potential witch. Similar beliefs are also prevalent among the Munda and *Ho* adivasis of Chhotanagpur.⁴ The Santal folktale on the origin of witchcraft describes how all the women of the community cheated *Marang Buru* (supreme being) and learnt the knowledge of witchcraft from him when he was about to pass it on to their husbands

⁴ The Chhotanagpur plateau included the districts of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Manbhum, Dhanbad, Palamau and Santal Parganas in the colonial period (presently it is a part of the state of Jharkhand but the Manbhum section covers the Purulia district and touches portions of the Bankura and Bardhaman districts of West Bengal). The tribal population of the area includes the Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Khariya and Lodha.

(Skrefsrud 1968; Bompas, 1909, 2001).⁵ Such a belief is indicative of the fact that, in the past, this knowledge belonged to the women in general. Troisi pointed out that the belief in the dangerous potentiality of women to seduce evil spirits and wreck vengeance on their enemies is reflected in the fact that participation in all sacrifices is a taboo for women (Troisi 1979). They are barred from eating the flesh of animals sacrificed to the *Abge Bonga* (family spirit) and Marang Buru (Dalton 1960; Man 1867). A married woman is also barred from entering the father's *bhitar* (ancestral house). The women also kept away from the sacred grove (*jaher than*) and are not allowed to be present when sacrifices are offered. They are regarded as '...imbued with strange mysterious powers. She cannot for example climb a roof because the nearness of her sex may pollute the *bongas* (spirits)' (Archer 1974). These taboos against women, if seen in association with the economic taboos such as touching the plough and tilling land or preparation of a straw basket and sorting of food grain in it, reveal the true motive behind their operation. It is obviously an attempt to replace a social system where women enjoyed equal if not higher economic power and social status by another which hastens the process of the defeat of the female sex and establish patriarchy.

Regarding the relation between the ojhas and witch-hunts Bodding wrote,

It is of course, out of the question that they (*ojha*) can do anything by magic, although they themselves may believe so; but they can do great deal by suggestion and by keeping people in fear; and I have no doubt that they know some vegetable poisons which they must administer themselves or by proxy. It is significant that in one of their 'mantras' they mention *Kamru Guru* who is the old *guru* of the medicine men (*ojhas*) (Bodding 1925).

But there is no such evidence that confirms any linkage between women shamans and organized persecution as its consequence. It can be argued that in the view of established gendered construction of witches in adivasi areas, their proximity to herbs and healing made them easy targets of witch-hunts. Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang also observed that the suppression of women healers and dealers in magic potions is a part of the struggle surrounding witch-hunting and consequently leads to the method of eliminating the role of women as healers in the adivasi society (Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang 1998). Thus, witchcraft practices can be viewed as a multiple reflection of gender and social tensions in the societies; a sphere where the tussle for power and resources are settled through violent means.

In this juncture, it is also relevant to point out that among the Santals only men can be ojhas or shamans or male-healers. A female, who claims to possess intimate knowledge and familiarity with the bongas, is looked upon as a witch and persecuted. Every ojha in order to create and sustain his reputation demonstrates his power to others and in doing so he not only earns respect within his community but also ensures steady personal profits. In reality, the ojha, janguru and the mahan are not merely individuals but virtually institutions of the Santal society. These specialists function as a link to communicate with the spirits which are beyond the comprehension of the average adivasi men and women. They also claim to genuinely identify the 'real' cause of the spell of maladies troubling

⁵ (Skrefsrud 1968) The first version of the Santal text was prepared by Skrefsrud which was based on his interactions with the old Santal Guru Kolean and was published in 1887.

the individual (Chaudhuri 1984: 55). Ajit Danda also made a relevant comment in this context,

For matters of such vital concern like determination and identification of witch from within the community the Santals have to depend on a specialist who is rather an alien. Since all witches among the Santals are women and all the office-bearers who govern the society are men, appointment of *janguru* from outside the community signifies either the Santal men's emphasis on finding neutral authority for the unprejudicial identification of witches or their reluctance to shoulder the responsibility of the act that was looming large...suggests a sort of guilty consciousness of the Santal males or their lack of courage to confront the women face to face (Danda 1990).

In the Santal society, witch-killing, therefore, becomes an expression of the fierce and bloody struggle that has been going on between the female and the male genders. Thus, it will not be irrelevant to argue here that through the practice of witchcraft adivasi women has been for long engaged in a gory struggle for her survival as a woman. She is fighting against all the taboos imposed on her, she is trying to retain her power as a healer, regain her status in the society as well as to protect the remnants of the social system that sanctions them.

Witch-hunting among the adivasi societies of India is therefore not just related with denouncing women's religious observances but also to stamping out other particular practices like healing by women. The suppression of women healers and dealers in magic potions is a part of the struggle surrounding witch-hunting. In India, among the Chhotanagpur adivasi communities, women have formerly had a more important role in healing in the colonial period. In the Mundari language there is no original Mundari word for male healer or shaman, but there is a Mundari word for witch-finder, *deora*, but the word for male healer, *ojha* is of Indo-European origin. The specialist male healer, *ojha* who is now also the witch-finder may well be relatively late institution among the Mundas (Mullick 2003). The one area of medicine that is still the preserve, particularly of old women, who are most likely to be denounced as witches, is that of contraception and abortion. Gender loss of control over their childbearing capacities is something that would contribute to strengthening men's control over the patrilineal family line. Witch-hunting also has direct linkages within the traditions of patriarchy, gender struggles and property rights as well. Therefore, in one way or another, witch-hunting is related to the attempt to institute certain gender roles and norms, roles and norms that were different from what existed earlier. Witch-hunting in the adivasi societies is the way of establishing new incorporated gender relations.

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ABBREVIATIONS: The abbreviation for a term must be given in parentheses after the term at first mention only. Thereafter, the abbreviation may be used. Acronyms will not have periods, so NATO, UNESCO, LTTE, IPKF. Abbreviations of English words, however, like 'Prof.', 'ed.' and 'approx.' will have a period at the end. Contracted words will also have a period. For example, 'eds.', 'Mr.' and 'Dr.'.

ITALICS: Italics should be used for non-English words, where they appear first in an article. Do not use italics for foreign terms that are now accepted words in the English language, and appear in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (pundit, guru, per se); but italicise *ibid*. Translations of non-English words should be placed in parentheses immediately following the words, e.g. *kitab* (book).

CAPITALISATION: Do not use capitals for denoting emphasis. Generally, civil, military, professional and religious titles are only capitalised when they appear along with the name of a person. For example, Prime Minister Nehru, President Kennedy and the president of India, the commander-in-chief of the army.

PUNCTUATION: Use a comma before 'and' when there are 4 or more variables. Hence, 'a, b and c', but 'a, b, c, and d'. Use double quote marks within single quote marks for quotations. The positioning of periods, commas, exclamation points and question marks should be within quote marks only in cases where they are part of the quoted material.

QUOTATION: Quotations should be enclosed within 'single' quotation marks. Substantial quotations of forty or more words should be indented without quotation marks. Quotations within a quotation should also be enclosed within 'single' quotation marks.

SUPERSCRIPTS: Place superscripts for footnote references *after* the punctuation mark.

TABLES AND FIGURES: These should be properly titled and numbered consecutively in the order in which they appear in the text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Please include a brief bio (100-150 words) of the author, along with an email address and institutional affiliation (if any).