

Capitalist Subsumption of Nature: Reflections on the Praxis of Externalization of Nature in 19th Century Chotanagpur

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Intimations, Symptoms, Positions

In this paper, I attempt to present *externalization of nature* as an ensemble of processes, articulating primitive accumulation, as it manifested in the history of 19th century Chotanagpur¹. Written, aphoristically, as the *separation* which constitutes the antithesis of labour-power and the conditions of re/production *qua* capital by Marx², recent readings of primitive accumulation have questioned the *isolation* of the concept in the Marxian history writing relegated to a mythic *once upon a time*³. A reinterpretation of its *means*, its *how*; its *agents*, its *who*; and, most importantly,

¹ I will be focusing on mainly the Ranchi and Singhbhum districts of the Chotanagpur division under the British rule in 19th century. Evidences and anecdotes from Palamau will also be used for it formed part of the Lohardaga district, along with Ranchi, before they were separated into different administrative units in 1890s.

² But not merely abstractly for the nature of the separation is precisely what accounts for the *differentia-specifica* of the capitalist mode of production (Balibar, 2015). The *separation*, thus acquires a specific *mode* and a specific *mediation*, as can be inferred from the following passages of Marx,

“... if we initially examine the relation (between the worker and the conditions of re/production) such as it has become... living labour appears as a mere means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it - and having produced, as the end-product, alien wealth on one side and [on the other] the penury which is living labour capacity's sole possession – then the matter is simply this, that the process itself (of primitive accumulation), in and by itself, posits the real objective conditions of living labour (namely, material in which to realize itself, instrument with which to realize itself, and necessities with which to stoke the flame of living labour capacity, to protect it from being extinguished, to supply its vital processes with the necessary fuels) and posits them as alien, independent existences - or as the mode of existence of an alien person, as self-sufficient values for-themselves, and hence as values which form wealth alien to an isolated and subjective labour capacity, wealth of and for the capitalist”. *Brackets mine.* (1973, p. 461).

³ Most notably so in the *transition debates* which were waged between Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb and in the mode of production debates beginning from the '60s of the last century, in the South Asian context, where, unanimously, a rigid distinction of 'normal' capitalist and primitive accumulation was maintained, irrespective of the

the *when* -its temporalization- have followed which had marked its isolation (Angelis, 2001; Mezzadra, 2011; Perelman, 2000; Read, 2003). A *necessity* within the re/production process, primitive accumulation is central to the institution of inversion of the subject-object dualism within the capitalist mode of production whereby the (non)control over the conditions of re/production renders the subject, *par excellence*, i.e., social labour, into an object, a *thing* and *vice versa*⁴.

In the same vein, one finds parallels in the environmental historiography where the subject/object dualism, identified as “Culture/Nature” or “Society/Nature” dualism within the differentiated and dialectical unity of Nature is noted as instituted since the advent of capitalist modernity (Foster, Clark, & York, 2010; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Merchant, 2008; Merchant, 1990; Moore, 2015; Smith, 2008; Vintilla, Groh, & Siefert, 1980; Williams, 2005). Whereas destruction of natural resources is often alluded to in this literature having inherent links with the elevation of the idea of an external, thingified and autonomous nature, what is interesting for us to note is the

differences between its contributors (Angelis, 2001; Mezzadra, 2011; Thorner, 1982; Sanyal, 2007). The “inherent-continuous”, as de Angelis calls it (2001) or the *eternal recurrence* of primitive accumulation in the history of capital in these recent rereadings resonates with what Marx says when he says, e.g., that the “these presuppositions [of the separation of labour-power and means of re/production concentrated in the hands of a capitalists], which originally appeared as conditions of [capitals] becoming – and hence, could not spring from its *action as capital* – now appear as results of its own realization, reality, *as posited by it – not as conditions of its arising, but as results...*” (1973, pp. 460). *Brackets mine*

⁴ Marx is categorical on this point and this is precisely the reason for the *specificity* of the inversion of the law of appropriation and of expanded reproduction in the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1973, p. 458; Rosdolsky, 1977). As he says,

“Within the framework of capitalist production this ability of objectified labour to transform itself into capital, i.e. to transform the means of production into the means of controlling and exploiting living labour, appears as something utterly appropriate to them (just as within that framework it is potentially bound up with it), as inseparable from them and hence as a quality attributable to them as things, as use-values, as means of production. These appear, therefore, intrinsically as capital and hence as capital which expresses a specific relationship of production, a specific social relationship in which the owners of the conditions of production treat living labour-power as a thing, just as value had appeared to be the attribute of a thing and the economic definition of the thing as a commodity appeared to be an aspect of its thing-hood, just as the social form conferred on labour in the shape of money presented itself as the characteristics of a thing. In fact the rule of the capitalist over the worker is nothing but the rule of the independent conditions of labour over the worker, conditions that have made themselves independent of him. (These embrace not only the objective conditions of the process of production – the means of production – but also the objective prerequisites for the sustenance and effectiveness of labour-power, i.e. its means of subsistence)... Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer... Thus, at the level of material production, of the life-process in the realm of the social – for that is what the process of production is – we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at the ideological level, namely the inversion of the subject into object and *vice-versa*” (Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, 1990, pp. 988-89)

simultaneous ascendancy of the idea of *human nature* during the same period. The point to be noted in such contradictory positing of the concept of nature – at once, autonomously outside us, as a *thing-in-itself* with its own laws and principles and, at the same time, that which constitutes our inadvertent, innermost essence - is the irrationality at the heart of modern rationality and the concealing of the predicate or, rather, its *capturing* and *taming*, in the relation between thusly defined, or instituted, subject/object (Vintilla, Groh, & Sieferle:1980; Smith:2008; Williams: 2005)⁵.

Departing from the historiographical commonsense of discussing merely the (mis)management of nature as an external, non-human realm of *things* in environmental histories of Chotanagpur(e.g., see Damodaran, 2002, 2007, 2016; Parajuli, 1996, 1998, 2001; Jewitt, 2008; Sivaramakrishnan & Cederlof, 2016), I argue that *externalization of nature* has as much to do with production of subjectivity as much as it has to do with production of the ecology of Chotanagpur marked by its particular landscapes, geology, patterns of rainfall etc. and their dialectic⁶. As it reads in this paper, then, externalized nature appears as how an emergent adivasi working class relates to herself structured by the imperative of surplus production which becomes *naturalized*. If one instantiation of it is as tenant peasantry, defined in opposition to the landlord as the legal proprietor of nature as land, forest etc. given to surplus production as *rent*; another instantiation of the same is as the adivasi wage labour in the plantations of Assam where its divorce off nature as conditions of re/production appears absolute for the production of *profit*. Simultaneously, moreover, if the export of natural resources out of the region engenders an idea

⁵One finds resonance of the same in Marx and Engels' critique of Feuerbach in German Ideology - "so much is this activity, this unceasing labour and creation, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists, that, were it interrupted for only a year, Feuerbach would not only find an enormous change in the natural world, but would very soon find that the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, were missing" (1976, p. 40).

⁶ Similarly, the theorization of difference that marks the various "ecological nationalisms", "ecological ethnicities" or "ecosystem peoples" in this historiography, I contend, issues from the presupposition of a fundamental separation between human and nature. Such theorization, thus, becomes a tallying of the relative differences of ecological praxes amongst different social groups, actors and identities vis-à-vis externalized nature(e.g., see Damodaran, 2002, 2007, 2016; Parajuli, 1996, 1998, 2001; Jewitt, 2008; Sivaramakrishnan & Cederlof, 2016).

Analogically, how Alfred Sohn-Rethel critiqued Kantian epistemology by referring it to the 'real abstraction' that occurs in societies dominated by commodity-production where the opposition between use-value and exchange-value occurs *really* in the *market*, unconscious of the people who engage in them, and which makes possible the very operation of abstraction in epistemology, I argue that the *possibility* of even talking of *nature* as a realm externalized from the human, social realm lies in primitive accumulation as *externalization of nature* which institutes certain praxes, which will be elaborated in the following sections (McLaughlin & Schlaudt, 2020; Toscano, 2008).

of externalized nature, the formalization of the logic of private property throughout the 19th century, underdevelopment of irrigation, determination of subsistence practices by the exchange-value of natural resources and, finally, the shifting patterns of rainfall, all had the inadvertent effect of inducing a subsistence crisis and the peculiar form of proletarianization of the adivasis of Chotanagpur. They, too, are considered as expressions of externalization of nature. Thus a social process, *par excellence*, I write economic concepts such as rent (absolute and differential), commissions, cesses, debt and interest, profit, and ‘price’ as ecological concepts.

In what proceeds, I will consider two historically simultaneous, acutest and symptomatic manifestations of this process during the nineteenth century - One, export-based agricultural production whereby we will present vignettes from the histories of opium, cotton and lac along with the deforestation that occurred in that region, all for the purposes of export outside the region⁷; and Two, the history of emigration of adivasis from the region as wage-labourers, again, outside the region, throughout the nineteenth century which leads into the domain of agrarian history of the region (Ghosh, 1999; Mohapatra, 1985; Mohapatra & Behal, 1992; Tinker, 1974; Sen, 2011). The tracing of these symptoms as *extraversions* and *extrusions* from the historical ecological dynamic at play back *within* Chotanagpur during the 19th century helps in marking the *metier* of the present article from the existing historiography with regards to the basic phenomenology at play therein. Written in the trope of a conflict between ‘political economy of profit’ and ‘moral economy of subsistence’ (within which are neatly placed non-adivasis *qua* Colonial State, planters and capitalists, traders, merchants, moneylenders and landlords etc. and adivasis as an undifferentiated mass, respectively) I argue that such sociological compartmentalization *reduces* the dynamics of environmental history of the region. As it reads in this paper, then, the *conflict* overflows such sociological compartmentalization and becomes as hegemonic as it is coercive; and power as repressive, as productive.

Export-based Agricultural Production

The histories of cotton, opium and lacproduction in Chotanagpur are instructive in showing a radical discontinuity that occurs in the interpellation of the objective conditions of production

⁷ Although there were other exported agricultural commodities too which were exported outside the region of their production into the local inter-district, national and international markets such as rice, maize, pulses, oil seeds etc., but since their production was not merely for the purposes of export (as they were also produced for self-subsistence), we shall come to them only later.

within the process of production due to primitive accumulation under the aegis of a formalistic continuity⁸. The trick, for our purposes, is to look out for the slightest of changes in the processes of their re/production which radically alters the entire character and the social relations of production viz. the subjective conditions of re/production.

Take, for example, opium, which was introduced in the earliest decades of the 19th century due to a *perwannah* by the Magistrate of Ramgarh to the local *elaqadars* and the police, which made them coerce their under-ryots for its cultivation. The untenability of the irrigational, topographical, geological conditions of the region and the existing know-how of the cultivators with the prerequisites of that utterly novel crop; along with the fact that s/he could be coerced by her superiors for ‘forced’ cultivation (Jha, 1964; Mohapatra P. , 1988; Roy, 1921; Thapar & Siddiqui, 2003) – these were the factors that highlight that a mere change in the commodity of production could make apparent the superfluity of the cultivators control over her conditions of labour (*eg.*, Land).

Or, the case of cotton, which is rather telling and which, from being one of the principle items of cultivation and export in the earliest decades of the 19th century, became almost marginal in the economy of the region by the end of the century⁹. Two innovations in its process of production

⁸ . As Marx says,

“The process of dissolution which turns a mass of individuals ... into potential free wage labourers... does not presuppose the disappearance of the previous sources of income or (in part) of the previous conditions of property of these individuals. On the contrary, it assumes that only their use has been altered, that their mode of existence has been transformed, that they have passed into other people’s hands as a free fund, *or perhaps that they have partly remained in the same hands*. But this much is evident. The process which has in one way or another separated a mass of individuals from its previous affirmative relations to the objective conditions of labour, which negated these relations and thereby transformed these individuals into free labourers, is also the same process which has liberated these objective conditions of labour potentially from their previous ties to the individuals which are now separated from them. (These conditions of labour comprise land, raw material, means of subsistence, instruments of labour, money or all of these.) *They are still present, but present in a different form, as a free fund, one in which all the old political, etc., relations are obliterated, and which now confront those separated, propertyless individuals merely in the form of values, of values maintaining themselves and each other. The same process which counterposes the masses of free labourers to the objective conditions of labour, has also counterposed these conditions to them as capital.*” (1946, pp. 104-6) (emphasis mine)

⁹Such was the dominance of cotton in the crop structure of the region that the peasants would refer to their cultivation as *Til-Kapas*. Further, in the 1860s, a ‘cotton road’ was being built to link Palamau and Banaras during the American Civil War (Mohapatra P. , 1988). As early as in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Bihar (and through its trade centers, Chotanagpur) had contributed significant amounts of raw cotton for English factories. It has been written that “In 1789, through the circuitous route of Flanders and Denmark, 2,000,000 lbs. of raw cotton reached the English market from India for the first time. In 1790, a report on the culture and manufacture of cotton wool, raw silk and tobacco in India, suggested that 1,328,000 lbs. of cotton were grown in Shahabad. Patna and Tirhut grew 320,000 lbs. and 216,000 lbs., respectively” [*Brackets mine*] (Sinha N. , 2012, p. 224).

aided each other in effecting *externalization of nature*. One was the shift from the *daha* or the shifting agricultural mode to *kachwan*, the settled agricultural mode, which was labour-intensive and irrigationally challenging; and the second, that it was now being ‘consumed’ as the raw material in the modern industries. As a result of these, cotton production was infested with merchants, traders, moneylenders and zamindars *qua sahus* and a debt-crisis for the cultivators so much so that Forbes, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur wrote of the producers of Palamau that “there is scarcely a single individual... who had not got what he calls his *sahu*” (*Final Report on Survey and Settlement of Palamau Government Estate* quoted in Mohapatra P. , 1988, p. 428)¹⁰. The “buying cheap and selling dear” of produce, which was the case for all export-oriented commodities in Chotanagpur for the detriment of the producers, was affected in the case of cotton through the mechanism of debt where the *sahus* would confiscate and market not merely the cotton produce but also other subsistence crops of the cultivators through exorbitant interest-rates and ‘attach’ her lands and other means of production. Additionally, it must also be mentioned that in 19th century Chotanagpur one of the most common routes to wage-labour was through indebtedness (Mohapatra P. , 1988; Roy, 1921; Hunter, 1877; Sinha, 2012).

The case of lac and shellac, over the production of which India held virtual monopoly in the world market until the 1940s and in which Chotanagpur contributed significantly, also shows how a change in merely where and how a commodity is consumed altered the conditions of re/production radically. Through predating colonialism, lac and shellac came to be exported to be used in gramophones, electrical insulation, dyes, bangles and toys and went from being valued at eight lakh rupees in 1868-9 to being valued at seventy lakhs in 1899-1900. Apart from the usual problem of inviting a series of *middlemen* in its procurement, transport and speculation, all profiting handsomely by ‘buying cheap and selling dear’ and keeping the commodity in

Its decline can be gauged by the fact that in 1864, the area under cotton was estimated at 9600 acres in 1600 villages of which only 558 acres remained in 1912 and, similarly, in Chotanagpur Estate held *khas*, in 1885, when it was already in decline, F.A. Slacke, had recorded 1.5% of the total arable as under cotton which reduced to 0.32% by 1902 (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 161-2).

¹⁰ “In the months of April, May and June, when food is scarce, the people apply to the mahajans and petty traders for small loans, to enable them to live and to buy seed for the coming autumn harvest. Some of them mortgage only their cotton, and some the whole of their coming crops. But once a cultivator has resorted to the grain merchant, he is rarely able to shake himself free again; nor is this to be wondered at, when we consider the rates of interest at which these loans are taken. For instance, a cultivator borrows, we will say, one rupee on his cotton crop; for this he binds himself to deliver to the grain merchant, when his crop is rice, one maund or 48 lbs. of seed-cotton, the market price of which at the cheapest rate, 12 sers per rupee, is Rs. 4” (A.H. Forbes, Commissioner of Chotanagpur, quoted in Hunter W. , 1877, p. 342).

circulation for atleast two months after its initial procurement; the history of lac production shows how a commodity harvested by the ‘village labourers’ to provide for the lean months, before the harvest of rice, became another reason for their exploitation due to the dynamics of ‘absolute’ and ‘differential’ rent. The lions share of the profit, in this regard, was pocketed by the landlords and tenure-holders of villages, as much adivasis as non-adivasis, who would charge upto 3/4th or 7/8th of the produce as rent for allowing its cultivation and charging what was called as the *Lakhar* or *dalkatti* tax¹¹. Thus, the exploitative relations within which lac was produced and through which such relations were themselves re/produced spelt that the adivasi cultivators would ignore its harvest along with the fact that it conflicted with the harvesting of the rice crop, the main agricultural crop of the region. The slightest of the oversights in its production would result in the killing of the very trees on which it was bred through the *Tachardia Lacca* insects (Macpherson, 1908; Gibson, 1942; Lindsay & Harlow, 1921; Mohapatra P. , 1988).

If the institution of rent and private property was complicit in this, it was also the market-price of the commodity which gave expression to the differential part of the rent. And similarly, if the Colonial State, the zamindars, or the tenure-holders *as de facto* zamindars were complicit, it was the cultivators too, inasmuch as the imperative in its re/production came to be occupied more and more by its exchange-value. Exchange-value, distributed variously as subsistence and wages, commissions, rent and profit to their personifications and the relations between them, *viz.*, the subjective conditions of re/production, marked various registers of the *rift* between man and nature. If at one level we can see the divorcing of nature and man in terms of how alienation of the produce was the immanent end of production, it also meant a certain ‘enclosing’ of Nature by the landlords and the tenure-holders and a mediated relationship between externalized nature and the adivasi cultivators, rent being the most apparent expression of this mediation which re/produced the relation of separation.

The purpose of these historical vignettes is also to show that the processes of externalization of nature was a social process, *par excellence*. Its sociality can be gauged by the fact that it created utterly novel subjects of re/production as *middlemen* and *sahus* in its own accord; re/produced and reinvented preexisting forms of social relations such as zamindars and their tenants and a very particular form of impoverishment of the actual producers, which will become

¹¹ Along with being involved as creditors of brood (larvae) as means of production or taking commission from the merchants and traders to procure produce from their villages.

clearer in the following sections. Moreover, the dynamism of power was such that it is as difficult to talk of it in terms of hegemony or coercion as it is difficult to talk of it in terms of being repressive or productive. In the histories of these commodities one sees the re/producton of the social relations of exploitation and their intensification. But one also notes resistences such as the quotidian and gradual banishment of cotton from the crop-structure (Mohapatra P. , 1988); or the grievances towards the forced cultivation of opium feeding into the Kol insurrection of 1832 following which it came to be produced in distinctly industrial terms by the use of adivasi wage-labour in the 'opium district' of Ranchi where its production increased massively (Jha, 1964; Reid, 1926; Hunter W. , 1877).

Deforestation for the Export of Timber

By the beginning of the 20th century, Ranchi comprised of 2,281 sq. miles of forests or 32% of the total area of the district and Singhbhum had 1,085 sq. miles or roughly one fourth (28%) of the total district area as forests (Reid, 1926; O'Malley, 1913). Though the evidence in this regard is speculative, J. Reid, the Settlement Officer for the Survey and Settlement Operations of Ranchi, 1902-10, estimated that there was a decline of 11% in the forest cover of Ranchi in the last 25 years of the nineteenth century (Reid, 1926); and for Singhbhum, in 1870s, Hunter had mentioned that "about two-thirds of Singhbhum District are covered with primeval forests" (1877, p. 23). For Chotanagpur, as a whole, 2,01,450 hectares or 11% decline of forest cover is estimated merely between 1870 and 1890 (Damodaran, 2002, Table 1).

Although deforestation was uncommon to the nineteenth century, the latter half of the same century brought out the inner contradictions of deforestation quite apparently so¹². This was because although deforestation had once occurred solely for the purposes of arable expansion, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, deforestation, occurred more rapidly and also for the purposes of export of timber in the making of railways or for other industries. Thus, W. Schlich and many others within the official circles had already noted the nexus between those under whom the Colonial State had settled the village lands as tenure-holders such as *zamindars*,

¹² Because of which, it is written that "... In the region... the clearance of forest clearly led to arable expansion rather than vice-versa. Forests and woodlands were cleared to service external demands for products such as lac and timber. Such clearance also occurred to provide both settlement space and fuel for the new externally derived but locally based mining and steel industries" (Richards, Hagen, & Haynes, 1985, p. 711).

thikadars, elaqadars, mundas and mankis and the attendant deforestation for the short-term pecuniary gains by private capitalist enterprises who, upon acquisition of the private property rights over the village forests, commenced a wholesale destruction of the forests for sale of timber. His approximation, that between merely 1880-5, one lakh sleepers were cut and exported for the railway network of India reflects the enormous demand of the timber of *sal* trees which once abounded the forests of Chotanagpur (Schlich, 1906).

And apart from the export of timber for railways outside the region, its establishment inside the region in the last two decades of the nineteenth century also accentuated the same process of deforestation. J. Reid had alluded to deforestation majorly as an effect of the opening of railways in Chotanagpur in 1891, saying, “The opening of Purulia Ranchi railway recently and of the main BNR line... has already had or is tending to more complete and thorough deforestation caused by all raiyats of the districts combined”(Reid, 1926, p. 127). Schlich had estimated that about 9 lakh *sal* sleepers were required for its construction, and one lakh annually required for its maintenance apart from the forests that were cleared, paving the way for its entry (1906). And then, predictably, the construction of railways within the region inevitably had the effect of inducing the market price and the demand of timber to rise. From the case of district Tamar, we have the following account testament to the antagonism between the local practices of subsistence by the inhabitants and the encroachments of a market economy,

“In the inaccessible country north of Chaklu not only the residents of the village but all neighbours as well enjoy unrestricted rights in every kind of forest produce. Southwards the railways give the big tree a commercial value; and eastwards the proximity of the plains, stripped clear of forests, has led to the imposition of a charge for fuel on non-residents. To the east of Baranda, even villagers have to pay for thatching grass. Thus, the thana of Tamar alone disclosed almost every stage of the forest question, and wherever enquiries can be pushed back they always exhibit the same story of gradual restriction on old customary right”(Enclosure no. 5 of the Selections from the Ranchi Settlement Papers quoted in Mohapatra P. , 1988, p. 26).

Thus, even within the areas, where the coming of railways had accentuated the estimation of the jungles by reference to its *market price*, but there hadn't been an explicit deforestation for the purposes of export of timber, the relation of the adivasi masses with the forests entailed a *mediated relationship* whereby their separation is registered through a cess or a charge for the use of forests, presupposing their *separation*¹³. The rapacity of the non-*adivasi* ruling classes such as

¹³ Interestingly, sometimes, these private capitalists were also found exercising their property rights as landlords by claiming tax from the tenants for their right to use forests (Damodaran, 1995).

zamindars and *jagirdars* in the decimation of the forest ecology of Chotanagpur is well established in historiography, and we needn't dwell on it here. What is interesting however, is how the adivasis themselves integrated within this aspect of the process of externalization of nature. Although, undoubtedly, many were the victims of this process, quite a few emerged as active collaborators of the State.

More often than not, these were from amongst the traditional adivasi elites of the village, generally, and particularly, the *Munda* or the *Mankis* who were elected as village headmen from amongst the *khuntkattidars* and *Bhuinhars* and settled as tenure-holders or landlords of the village by the Colonial State. There were many instances recorded in the settlement of 1902 of the *mundaormanki*, selling off the village jungles to private contractors, in lieu of cash and the conflict that ensued between them and the villagers (Mohapatra P. , 1988)¹⁴. In his *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, Rev. Hoffman attested to the common practice amongst the *Mundas* and the *Mankis*, qua landlords and tenure-holders, of selling village forests due to the opening of communications [which] had given a value to timber in the jungle and which it did not previously possess (Hoffman & Emelen, 1950). They, likewise, held exclusive rights over granting the permission to clear village forests for arable expansion¹⁵.

The consequences of deforestation and the rapidity which it acquired in the latter half of the nineteenth century was manifold. Firstly, since it was a major source of subsistence and of making agricultural implements and other domestic articles of utility for the adivasi masses, deforestation immediately affected their re/production process adversely. Secondly, apart from this immediate subsistence crisis, it also had the effect of disrupting the rainfall in the region, not in terms of an absolute reduction in the amount of rainfall the region received in a year, but a shift in its cycles, which was the chief cause of failure of harvests and the subsistence crises given its centrality as

¹⁴ See "Note on Constitution of *Khuntkatti* and other villages in South Tamar and Khunti for the Information of Assistant Settlement Officer" in Selections from the Ranchi Settlement Papers. *Commissioners Record Room, Ranchi*.

¹⁵ Although it has often been alleged that the 'village community' practiced their rights in the village resources, including its forests, in an egalitarian manner, the fact should be noted that the *khuntkattidars* retained a structural authority over other inhabitants of the village on the question of village resources. How they practiced it, democratically or not, is a separate issue altogether (Chaudhuri, 2008).

the principle means of irrigation¹⁶. Further, deforestation unattended by conversion into arable led to soil erosion and depletion of the fertile top soil layers, making vast stretches unfit for cultivation and formation of erosional, alienated and alienating landscapes like gullies and ravines. All these, naturally, adversely impacted the re/productive process of a large section of the adivasis. The most symptomatic phenomenon of these general subsistence crises were the periodic famines which afflicted the region under consideration in the latter half of the nineteenth century, prior to which there is no record of the same (Damodaran, 1995, 2002; Schlich, 1906; Mohapatra P. , 1988; Meher-Homji, 1991; Warren, 1974).

Corollary to these changes, social differentiation and conflict within the society also accentuated. On the one hand, the conflict between the traditional adivasi elites *qua* landlords who indulged in selling off village forests for the purposes of profit at the cost of the subsistence of the other subordinate members of the village community; then, the same conflict accentuated when the Colonial State entrusted the same dominant sections of the society with the care of these forests when it embarked on a conservationist agenda¹⁷; and finally, also a gendered conflict within the society which may be seen symptomatically in the seasonality of the instances of witch-hunts and

¹⁶ Over-pouring in the months of June and early cessation of the rains in the September-October were signs of a problematic, *bad year*. Most of the subsistence crises in the region were coincidental with such irregularities in the rainfall (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 76-80).

¹⁷ Thus, in 1867 when the Commissioner of Chotanagpur decreed the cutting of timber for extracting *dhanuaor* resin, or for cutting trees for the purposes of sale in the market illegal, the responsibility for overseeing that regulations were adhered to was vested in village councils made up of the *khuntkattidars*. "As a result," writes Ata Mallick, "in 1868, 112 persons were arrested in Singhbhum with the help of the *Mankees*... and tried for cutting *Sal* timber". Owing to such piece-meal legislations of the Interventionist State, about 224 cases of forest offences were recorded in Chotanagpur between 1892-3 (Mallick, 2012, pp. 750-1). Furthermore, the antagonism towards the State of the people was furthered by the conflicts between the forest guards who were often found oppressive in their conduct towards the locals. As early as 1870s when these legislations were introduced, Valentine Ball had written,

"The people living on the edge of forest reserves have complained to me of the great hardship caused to them by being shut out of the forest, which had previously afforded them a means of livelihood, or at least of collecting certain jungle products, the sale of which has enabled them to supplement their other means of subsistence. They said that if their cattle strayed across the boundary, the chuprasi in charge of the forest was down upon them at once, and they had either to bribe him or accompany him to the magistrate's court forty miles off, to answer the charge" (Ball, 1985, p. 649).

Further, the case of Bandgaon shows how the entrustment of the task of forest conservation in the hands of the dominant sections led, inevitably, to either its inadvertent deforestation at the hands of the same dominant classes or them extracting more surplus from the other subordinate inhabitants of the village as cess and charges for domestic use, also (Macpherson, 1908).

social boycotting of women(Mohapatra P. , 1988; Hunter W. , 1877)¹⁸. And on the flipside, due to the caprices in the seasonality of rainfall, many from within the traditional adivasi elites who were even propertied, such as *Bhuinharsand Khuntkattidars* also sunk to the ranks of subordinate adivasi masses insofar as they were not settled by the State as landlords, something which will be elaborated in the following sections. Thus, in this regard, we may reformulate our earlier thesis that the process of externalization of nature was a social process *par excellence* not just because of how, quite apparently, the export of the natural resources of the region meant diminishing control of the producers with(in) the conditions of re/production but also how externalized nature, itself, worked towards re/producing, on an extended scale, the class contradictions within the Chotanagpuri society.

In what we have posited hitherto, a moment's reflection will make it apparent that we have presupposed what we have sought to explain. If the process of externalization of nature entails a *mediated relationship* between the separated human and non-human, external, natural realms which re/produces their separation, nonetheless; doesn't the categorization of social relations within *subjective conditions of re/production* and of land, rain, soil fertility, etc. within the *objective conditions of production* presuppose and reproduce that same separation within our theorization? The validity of the self-criticism and the danger inhered in such a narration is precisely the reason why we need to include the case of emigration of the adivasis to the labour market *outside* the region as crucial for the processes of *externalization of nature*. If nature is *objectified* in the environmental histories of Chotanagpur which highlight a struggle of capitalistically aligned non-adivasis vis-à-vis non-capitalist or anti-capitalist adivasis which becomes the *subject* of these narratives(e.g., see Damodaran, 2002, 2007, 2016; Parajuli, 1996, 1998, 2001; Jewitt, 2008; Sivaramakrishnan & Cederlof, 2016); one can see the inverse order of signification in a Malthusian narrative of adivasi emigration from the region where the so-called human realm is objectified and emigration narrated as *natural* owing to the regions 'carrying

¹⁸ Social degradation of women, which took the form of witch-hunting sometimes, was linked to the crisis of their knowledge of the ecology and consequently, authority. For example, though exempted from most of the rituals and rites, the women used to propitiate the *Marang Buru*, the great mountain who was the 'lord of the rain', "beseeching him to give their crops seasonable rain"(Campbell, 1866, pp. 190-1). Hence, "instances like barrenness, outbreak of diseases, epidemic, deaths, often provided the social occasioning and pretext for carrying out witch-hunts, gave an otherwise inhuman act, a social legitimacy" (Sinha S. S., 2011, pp. 127); And the fact that witch-hunting was a distinctly local phenomenon because of which Hoffman could write that "widows driven out as witches from their own villages, are easily received as servants in other villages, nobody there apprehending any harm from them" for it was in the village that the social tensions on such accounts was higher (Hoffman & Emelen, 1950, pp. 1003).

capacity' which becomes the *subject* capable of automating such social dynamisms. Thus, for J. Reid, the Settlement Officer of Ranchi in 1902-10, as much as for a large section of the contemporary observers, emigration was to be "... regarded as the natural outlet for the excess population which the district is unable to carry" as he believed that "the area under cultivation is not capable of supporting a population in excess of what it carries at present" (Reid, 1926, pp. 10,118)¹⁹. The point, however, is not to privilege either approaches and consider them as logically consistent with the processes of *externalization of nature*, grasping them as symptomatic of the concealment, capturing and disciplining of the *predicate*.

Unravelling the Eco-Logic of Capital

In order to even read the emigration of adivasis as wage-labourers from Chotanagpur, known as *Dhangars*, as a symptom, we must establish the expanse of it, concretely²⁰. One of the earliest

¹⁹ The critique of this can run thus - In the same report, however, where Reid voiced the concern of approaching the limits of the "carrying capacity" of the region as it stood by the end of the nineteenth century, he also mentioned scope for even further reclamation and expansion of the arable which would be able to accommodate an additional of 4,00,000 people (1926, pp. 118). A more scathing point, however, which contradicts Reids' estimation of the regions "carrying capacity" and justification of emigration is the testimony of A.H. Forbes, the commissioner of Chotanagpur from 1896-1902, who estimated that nearly 1, 60,000 maund of rice were exported out of Ranchi in the same time-period, annually (cited in Mohapatra P. , 1988, p. 419). Reid, in that same report, limited this amount to never exceed 3,00,000 maund in any year and wrote, "balance of trade is heavily against the district... it thus appears that the miscellaneous food-crops, gondli, marua, wheat, and vegetables are consumed by the inhabitants of the district. The gondli and marua crops are a partial substitute for rice in the poorest families for two or three months every year..." (Reid, 1926, p. 121). Relatedly, the last decade of the nineteenth century transitioning into the twentieth century witnessed the devolution of the region from a subsistence economy to an import-based economy where even the basic articles of everyday diet were imported from outside the region.

Our critique is further reinforced by Mohapatras' conclusion after a study of 28 villages of Estate under the Raja of Chotanagpur, 1883-1902 - that although there is a positive correlation between the arable expansion and population increase in these villages, population increase had far outstripped arable expansion, and on an average, "with every unit increase in the number of families, there was 1.27 acre increase" in the arable (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 145-8) - severely less than what was averaged as the minimum landholding for an average family for 5.4 persons with the level of agricultural productivity, then (J.D. Siftons survey of Ranchi in 1911 quoted in Schwerin, 1978, p. 25).

²⁰"The term Dhangar, is applied to a hill-man who works as a yearly labourer. H.H. Risley, the Victorian ethnologist, says: 'the word may be nothing more than the Oraon for adults. According to another interpretation, the name has reference to the fact that persons working as *dhangars* receive the bulk of their wages in *dhan* or unhusked rice. *Hobson-Jobson*, under the heading '*Dangur*' (the older European rendering of the word) suggests it is 'the name by which members of the various tribes of Chutia Nagpur, but especially of the Oraons, are generally known when they go out to distant provinces to seek employment as labourers ("coolies"). We are then told: "the late General Dalton says: "it is a word that from its apparent derivation (*dang* or *dhang*, "a hill") may mean any hill man..."(Tinker, 1974, p. 47)

It is noteworthy that in Mundari, as in the language of Oraons, a certain cognate of the term, *dangr* meant 'the time of youth'. A commonly used expression was *dangrare bar Mon jakedegojadtai* which meant 'when he was young he would carry up to two maunds' (Hoffman & Emelen, Encyclopaedia Mundarica, vol. 2, 1950, p. 977).

Further, industrial production aside, there are also traces of the people of Chotanagpur, such as Bhuiyas, being employed as agricultural labourers of South Bihar. H.H. Risley believed, "the south of the Chota Nagpur country may have been their original centre of distribution. Spreading from that point, their social fortunes seem to have

references that one finds of the *Dhangar* is from a letter written in 1820s by S.T. Cuthbert, the Magistrate of Ramgarh, who informs us of how they were coveted in the Indigo plantations and factories “on account of their performing more work and at a lower rate”(Roy,1921). “Chotanagpur”, as Mohapatra said, “can be called the birthplace of the Indian industrial proletariat”(Mohapatra P. , 1988, p. 540). However, as even Cuthbert could apprehend, the identity of the dhangar was fluid since this emigration was seasonal²¹. And although the exact extent of the numbers of Dhangars cannot be ascertained, according to the testimony of one John Mackay, an indigo planter in Bengal, generally “after a good harvest at least 50,000 Dhangars are employed by the planters”(Select Committee on Transportation, 1838, pp. 185-94). We can safely contend that even in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, there were thousands who were emigrating in search of work outside Chotanagpur. And they were ‘absorbed’ not just in the indigo plantations and factories, but also as railway workers, sweepers in metropolitan towns of Calcutta, servants and rickshaw pullers and all “who may give them employ”(Jha, 1964, pp. 23,26; Mahto, 1994).

Further, from late 1820s onwards till the end of the 1850s, another inlet for the absorption of the Dhangars from Chotanagpur had opened in the plantations of Mauritius, Demerara, Trinidad, Jamaica, British Guiana. The Dhangars had emerged as a ‘mania’ amongst the global plantocracy when faced with the “hysteria over the loss of profit due to slave emancipation”(Ghosh, 1999, p. 19); and considering that there was an average of 1/3 Dhangars amongst the labourers who

been determined by the character of people with whom they came in contact. The stronger non-Aryan tribes-Mundas, Hos, and Santals-cut a wedge through the line of Bhuinya advance towards the north; a small number successfully established themselves in Hazaribagh beyond the range of Mundas, while those who travelled the furthest in this direction fell under the domination of Hindus in Bihar, and were reduced to the servile status which the Musahars now occupy’ (Risley quoted in Prakash, 1990, p. 37)

²¹ There was an ecological logic to this seasonality, as was captured by Sir W.W. Hunter who wrote, “Many of them come from... where the population is permanently just one degree above absolute starvation, where the extension of tillage is only possible after a considerable outlay of capital in digging tanks, where the winters are severe, where the cutaneous diseases and every infirmity common to half-starved hunting communities are rampant, and where the political dissatisfaction which springs from a chronically hungry stomach is never unknown. They settle in a land where Nature has done her utmost to render unnecessary the toil of man, where good wages are always to be had in ready money, and where the very jungle produces as ample a subsistence as their little cultivated patches at home. Every winter, after the indigo is packed, number of labourers visit their native villages and seldom return unaccompanied with a train of poor relations, who look forward to the wages of the spring sowing season as the soldiers of Alaric contemplated the spoils of Lombardy.... The hill-races, uncivilised though they be, are sagacious enough to find out and frequent the districts where they can get the highest price for the one marketable article that Providence has given them – the work of their hands” (Hunter W. , 1868, pp. 226-8).

emigrated from India, the tens of thousands adivasis who reached the plantations abroad testify to the ‘mania’ of the global plantocracy for profits, amply (Tinker, 1974).

From the 1860s onwards, however, the adivasi wage-labourers were absorbed into the most fitting of their ‘industrial residences’ in the tea plantations of Assam, Duars and Darjeeling. Between 1878-79 merely, 25614 registered and another 8000 unregistered emigrants from Chotanagpur were employed in Assam (Ghosh, 1999); in 1880 there were 10,622 registered; and 1885 there were 9,790 registered emigrants (Tinker, 1974); a lot more proceeding there unregistered, after the Labour District Emigration Act I of 1882 (Mohapatra & Behal, 1992). Thenceforth, the boom of emigration from Chotanagpur can be substantiated by the fact that by 1901, there were more than two and a half lakh adivasis who had emigrated to Assam from merely Ranchi and over 63,820 from Singhbhum comprising of almost 23.17% and 10% of the actual population of these districts, respectively (Mohapatra P. , 1985). Over the entire nineteenth century, one may safely argue that lakhs of adivasis had to emigrate outside the region for *work*, a phenomenon which was progressively intensifying.

This extraversion and extrusion of the adivasi emigration *outside* the region had the dynamics of capitalist private property *within* the region of Chotanagpur which is marked by an *active* contradiction of *property* and *propertylessness* –which is how, even after capitalist production “stands on its feet, it not only maintains” the separation between the workers and the conditions of production, “... but reproduces it on a constantly expanding scale” (Marx, 1990, pp. 874-5) (Marx, 1973; Althusser, 2005)²².

We must reconsider rent here again, building from earlier, and posing it as constitutive of this *inner, active* contradiction of *property* and *propertylessness*, both exerting itself against the other. Rent, in Chotanagpur in the 19th century, was paid in cash, kind and labour (Mohapatra P. , 1991a) and served to re/produce the class contradiction in the re/production of the society which is, itself, but a re/productive process. On its behest, an entire class of the society absents itself from the re/production process whereby man and externalized, objectified nature, so to speak, achieve a unity of being and re/produce Nature as a dialectical, differential unity and yet flourish by extracting the surplus or the product from those who are directly engaged in the process of

²² Momentous, in this regard, was the institution of the Permanent Settlement in Chotanagpur (See Mr. G.K. Webster, Manager under the Court of Wards of the Chotanagpur Estate, quoted in Hunter W. , 1877) (Jha, 1964; Reid, 1926).

re/production. Due to the compulsion of its payment, the subordinate class is bound to the propertied classes who dictate, if nothing else, then at the very least, that the re/production process must be ongoing, and successfully so, despite the vagaries and vicissitudes in that process²³. As an institution, rent inheres a potential - to reduce the share of the producers and aggravate the share of the landowners or rent-collectors; the potential to aggravate the dispossession of the adivasi from nature and accumulate thus, externalized nature leading to the emergence of the absolutely propertyless adivasis i.e. the wage labourer; and in the first and last analysis, the potential of exchange, of the right to obtain a speck of the total prowess of the landowners by the peasantry viz. their land ownership, for harnessing subsistence from this external nature by the peasant and/or agricultural labourers in return of surrendering a portion of the produce thus produced. The appearance of exchange and its generalization, however, is a *necessary illusion* or the masking of simple and pure appropriation in the *guise of exchange* – in short of primitive accumulation²⁴.

Thus, seen from the vantage point of “rent”, the symptomatic reading of the phenomenon of emigrating adivasi as wage-labourer starts justifying itself for just like the wage-labourer is bound to produce surplus as profit, the adivasi cultivator is bound to produce surplus as rent; just like the wage-labourers’ relation to the objective conditions of production is a mediated one,

²³ As it was given, e.g., of Ranchi, by the end of the nineteenth century, out of the 80.84% of population engaged in agricultural and pastoral activities, 74.51% were “rent-payers”, 1.15% were “rent-receivers”, 3.04% were “labourers” and 2.14% were categorized under “miscellaneous” (Reid, 1926, p. 12).

In 1901, in Singhbhum, 76.7% were dependent on agriculture and 8% in industrial service. L.S.S. O’Malley wrote of the populations involved in agriculture, “60 per cent are actual workers, including 2,38,000 rent-payers, 45,000 field labourers and 200 rent-receivers.” (O’Malley, 1910, p. 50).

²⁴ Of which Marx wrote as follows,

“Production based upon exchange-value and a community based on the exchange of these exchange-values, and labour as the general condition of wealth, all presuppose and produce the separation of labour from its objective conditions. Though... production for exchange and community based on exchange may appear to posit property as deriving solely from labour, and private property in the product of one’s own labour as a precondition, this appearance is deceptive. The exchange of equivalents (but it is merely) the surface layer of a production which rests on the appropriation of other people’s labour without exchange, but under the guise of exchange. This system of exchange has capital as its basis. If we consider it in isolation from capital, as it appears on the surface, as an independent system, this is mere illusion, though necessary illusion. It is therefore no longer surprising to find that the system of exchange-values – the exchange of equivalents measured in labour – turns into the appropriation of other people’s labour without exchange, the total separation of labour and property, or rather that it reveals this appropriation as its concealed background. For the rule of exchange-values and of production producing exchange values presupposes alien labour power as itself an exchange value i.e., it presupposes the separation of living labour power from its objective conditions; a relationship to these – or to its own objectivity – as someone else’s property; in a word, a relation to them as capital.” (1964, p. 114).

whereby their separation is presupposed and reproduced, so is the relation between the cultivator or peasant to land is a mediated one, whereby their separation is reproduced and marked by rent; and just as the expropriation of the wage-worker from the means of production appears absolute, that expropriation appears relative in the case of the cultivator or the peasantry paying rent and s/he becomes a wage-worker on their *own* lands inasmuch as there is a separation via mediation through the institution of rent²⁵.

Now, to understand the *inner dynamism* of capitalist private property, two instances shall suffice where one can gauge both its coercive and its hegemonic character. In the first instance, one may cite several examples, all of which has the commonality that the transition from a cultivator to a wage-labourer was automated by the surplus which was extracted from the cultivators as rent and due to the small holdings of the majority of the peasantry²⁶. Throughout the nineteenth century,

²⁵ Which also explains, to a certain extent, the fluidity of the identity of a wage-worker as *Dhangar* in the history of the adivasis in the earliest part of the nineteenth century when it was seasonal, then that fluidity appearing unseasonally i.e., as an indentured labourer and then, that fluidity evaporating completely in the case of permanent emigration.

²⁶ Thus, wrote Reid during the Settlement operations of Ranchi, "The average holding of a cultivator is 12 acres. Assuming that the tenancy comprises *don* and *tanrin* normal proportions, 33% and 67%, respectively, the average holding consists of 4 acres of *don* and 8 acres of *tanr*. Assuming that a cultivators family consists of 5.3 persons, which, according to the census figures, is the average, and that each member requires half a seer of rice per day for sustenance, the total consumption of rice per family comes to 24 maunds of rice, or 48 maunds of *dhanper* annum. The total produce of an average holding.... Is 80 maunds of *dhan* only. Allowing for home consumption, which has been calculated on a very moderate scale, their remains only 32 maunds of *dhan*. Out of this, the cultivator must set aside about 6 maunds for seed, and there remain only 26 maunds, from the sale price of which he must pay his rent, and purchase necessaries, including clothes, salt, tobacco etc. The market value of 26 maunds of *dhanis* about Rs. 32.8. We have seen above that the rent charges of ordinary raiyats holdings are equivalent to only one-eighteenth of the gross value of the produce; but when the cost of the immediate necessaries of life are deducted, it appears that the available margin, out of which this charge should be paid, is extremely small and in bad years it vanishes altogether. There are, no doubt, some supplementary sources of income. The raiyats usually keep some poultry, goats, sheep, cattle and pigs. One or two members of the family sometimes work as labourers or emigrate to Assam or the Duars, and portion of these earnings goes to the support of the family... from whatever point of view the statistics are looked at, the margin for luxuries and for payment of the rent is small, and, as a matter of fact, the latter is frequently paid not from the proceeds of the cultivated land, but from the wages of labour and sale of an occasional bullock or a few sheep, which the cultivator has managed to rear" (Reid, 1926, pp. 118-19)

Similarly, Hoffman wrote in the first decade of the twentieth century when consulted by J.D. Sifton, a senior government official on the advisability of rent increase,

"Those who cultivate less than 8 *kats*, do not reap enough to get the minimum of sufficient food for the whole year. They are therefore even in the best years forced to buy a certain amount of rice and the difficulty of this increases with the price. Is it not a cruel mockery to raise their rents because the food prices have risen? Those who cultivate only 4 *kats*, i.e., just enough to give them a minimum of sufficient food for half the year must find money to buy food for the remaining 6 months. They have however another alternative: *they may arrange themselves so as to live on half rations the whole year round by accustoming themselves and their children to systematic starvation*. And what of those who have but 2 *kats* or even but one? The life these unfortunate wretches lead from April to October is

rent increased progressively (Reid, 1926; Mohapatra P.: 1991b). We must note here two things – one, that rent proper did not exist in Chotanagpur and the tenanted-peasant family had to surrender a portion of their produce as auxiliary cesses alongside rent of which Reid wrote that there were atleast over fifteen such legally sanctioned cesses (1926)²⁷. And two, that whatever may have been the surplus margin as rent and other dues that were legally sanctioned by the State, the tenure-holders and the rent-receiving classes hardly ever abided by the same (Reid, 1926; Calcutta Review, 1869; Macdougall, 1985).

Coercion through rent, in this way, automated adivasis from peasantry to wage-labourers and vice versa. But rent and ergo, private property, not just as coercion i.e., as an *imposition from without* which automated the lives of the adivasis but also as a hegemonic institution i.e., *from within*. Thus, it was written of the causes of emigration by the settlement officer that,

““It is not uncommon to find that a Munda or an Uraon will persist in cultivating the ancestral fields long after he has been ejected from them by the Courts, and I have known numerous cases in which the individual aborigines underwent imprisonment five or six times for persisting in their attempts to get back the ancestral lands. Large number of those who emigrate to Assam and the Duars return, if they are able to save a little money, and buy back the farms which they had lost, or some land in the vicinity. *This, in fact, is often the object with which they emigrate...* When an aboriginal comes to the civil or criminal Courts, he is literally despoiled, unless he happens to be a Christian. I have known many cultivators pay Rs. 40 or Rs. 50 for a copy of a map or a judgement the real cost of which was about 2 or 3 rupees, and the fees paid to the numerous touts, who hover about the vicinity of the Courts, are on a similarly lavish scale. There are besides the usual Pleaders’ and Mukhtears’ fees. Litigation is, therefore, always ruinous to the aboriginal, whether he finally wins or loses his case. He is obliged to borrow heavily and to mortgage his lands. *The immediate result is that at least one member, if not the whole family, is obliged to emigrate to retrieve family fortunes.* The Courts themselves are not always free from blame. It is not sufficiently realized always that every postponement means increased cost and trouble to the litigants, and the interests of struggling Mukhtears and Revenue Agents do not always coincide with those of the parties whom they represent.”(Reid, 1926, pp. 10-11).

miserably beyond description. Since the ploughing and sowing operations fall into this period one at least of the men must remain at home. Those who can, go abroad to work and earn something because in Chotanagpur itself day labour is scarce. The women try to earn daily 2 measures of paddy by weeding the fields and transplanting the paddy of others, especially of zamindars.... Such, as I pointed out, is with mere variations of intensity, the misery in which at least 80% of the cultivators live in *bhuinhari* and *zamindari* villages even with the rents as they are at present...”(Hoffman & Emelen, Encyclopaedia Mundarica, vol. 10, 1950, pp. 2940-2). The same was the dynamism for Singhbhum(Sen, 2011).

²⁷J. Reid had calculated these to amount to between Re. 1 to Rs. 1-8 per unit of area. Considering that the official opinion was that these rakumats and abwabs were liable only on tanr or uplands included within each tenancy and that the average amount of tanr or uplands held by the average raiyat was 8 acres of tanr, the average amount of rakumats and abwabs extracted by the peasantry would come to over Rs. 8 per tenancy. This value of these dues came to being almost 50% of the average cash-rental taken from the peasantry from *don* lands (Reid, 1926, pp. 87-9, 118).

The point in looking at rent as *coercion* and as *hegemony* is not to separate the two but to stress their unity for even when the rent was raised, the adivasi tenant-cultivator emigrated in order to pay the raised rent and cultivate his meagre land holdings and when he spent loaned money on court cases and had to emigrate in order to de-mortgage his lands – it was the rapacity of the landlords alone, which forced such a situation in the first place. In both, however, their *propertylessness* was re/produced via rent - by themselves and their landlords, ergo, the social relations of re/production.

However, that is not it. Given that the *externalization of nature* as a social process *par excellance* works through the externalized nature to re/produce that social process of primitive accumulation, whereby the conditions of re/production are posited antithetically against the actual producers, i.e., as *value alien* or as capital (Marx, 1990, p. 1016); in order to bring out the eco-logic of Capital, we must recapitulate and begin from the thesis put forward by Prabhu Mohapatra on the primary cause of emigration of adivasi as wage-labourers as the violation of an “ecological imperative” of the region (Mohapatra P.:1985). In that direction, the first task is to understand the dynamics of arable expansion that had been ongoing in Chotanagpur ever since the sixteenth century A.D. and whose contradictions are made apparent for analysis only in the nineteenth century when the figure of the *Dhangar* becomes generalized. As we have said earlier, we shall, however, be confined here to only its dynamism in the nineteenth century.

Dynamic of Arable Expansion in the Nineteenth Century

To understand the dynamics of arable expansion in Chotanagpur, one must begin with the geological particularity of the region, a plateau sparsely with rocky-hill formations called *pats* and measuring 3600, 2100 and 800 feet above sea-level. The areas of Ranchi and Singhbhum, that we are concerned with here, were situated upon the plateau which averaged 2100 feet above sea level, rising to 2,500 and then descending with Singhbhum, near Chaibasa to 800 feet above the sea level (Hunter W. , 1877; Bradley-Birt, 1910; Prasad, 1973). Owing to the topographical and geological peculiarity of the region, large areas of the region were naturally unfit for cultivation, a certain system of classification of arable was followed in the region in which the arable space was divided broadly between *Don* lands which were situated in the depressions and between hill-rises of the terrain and the rocky slopes of the ridges which were called the *Tanr* lands. These differences were based on soil content, water retention capacity and the slope of the land; and the

former was considered better than the latter for rice-cultivation – the staple crop of the region, with three classes of lands in each and the *Don I and Tanr I* being the most fertile and the third of each class being the least fertile (Dobbs, 1919; Mohapatra P. , 1988).

Given the geological imperative, it should be mentioned that the ideal *Don I* land in the region were scarce and in most of the colonial documents, they were defined by a reference to their topographical or natural location. Thus, Hunter defined it as “the rich alluvial land which lies lowest in the trough or depression between the ridges, and which from its position receives all the vegetable mould washed off the slopes” (Hunter W. , 1877, p. 336); and T.S. Macpherson, in a similar vein, described it as “fields lying at the bottom of the depression between the ridges... as they retain the moisture well, produce excellent crops in normal years and good crops in years of drought. The most valuable *don I* is *kudar*, that is, land kept permanently moist by a rivulet or spring flowing through it” (Macpherson & Hallett, 1917, p. 111). *Kudar* lands could produce two crops in a year but were scanty throughout Ranchi. Macpherson had estimated only 760 acres of such land in the entire district of Ranchi (1917, pp. 112). However, despite this naturally imposed limitation, out of the total cropped area, 60% in Ranchi and 69% in Singhbhum of the total arable was devoted to rice-cultivation as it was recorded in the survey and settlement operations which began in 1902 (Table 3.10 in Mohapatra P. , 1988). How was it, then, possible that in naturally deficient conditions for the growth of wet-rice, it assumed such an important place in the crop-structure?

That such a substitution in the crop-structure, itself, was symptomatic of intensification of agriculture has been established by Prabhu Mohapatra, although without any attention to the reasons for this shift. There were two ways through which the intensification of agriculture in Chotanagpur was carried out. To talk only of the *Tanr* lands first, there was a decrease in its fallowing cycles which was necessary given the natural deficiency of these types of lands in terms of water-retention and its soil content. Thus, for *Tanr* lands, a system of crop-rotation was followed in which *marua*, *gorarice*, *urid*, *gondli*, *sirguja* and *kurthi* were sown and harvested with gaps and subsequent sowing extending upto a year or two depending upon the estimation of the land and the rejuvenation of fertility by the peasantry. With population increase in the districts of Ranchi and Singhbhum, the fallowing cycles of the *Tanr* lands were shortened, thus, making vulnerable the crops which were cultivated upon them (Mohapatra P. , 1988). And whereas, this,

again, could imply a certain Malthusian dynamic, a more critical perspective develops when we look at the intensification of agriculture practiced by converting *Tanr* lands into Don III and II lands for wet-rice cultivation, the most dominant form of arable expansion and intensification of agriculture.

The method developed by the adivasis was that of terracing due to which they were able to terrace *Tanr* lands into Don and hence, the preponderance of wet-rice cultivation despite natural limitations. This method solved the topographical and technological limitations imposed on settled agriculture given the dependence of the agricultural activity upon rainfall, primarily, for irrigation (Captain Deprees Report of 1869 quoted in Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 52). Hunter had noted how this dynamic of arable between *Don* and *Tanr* lands and said that “*Tanr* lands are divided from rice-lands by a continually shifting line, and that in crowded villages the margin of rice-cultivation is gradually being carried by fresh terracing, higher up the slopes” (Hunter W. , 1877, p. 336). The evidence of conversion of *Tanr* into Don lands can also be found in the relative preponderance of Don III lands in both Ranchi and Singhbhum on which colonial officials, noting the problems of arable expansion had noted that it is usually *Tanr* lands, “really unfit for cultivation” and “particularly liable to famine. (J.D. Sifton quoted in Mohapatra P. :1988: 60). In Ranchi, we have the figure of relative proportion of the different classes of Don lands which highlights that nearly 63% of the total land was Don II and Don III and merely 36% were Don I lands (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 62). This is because these lands were characterized by their unprotectedness against the vagaries of rain and an enormous fluctuation of rice-yield that it generated in a year when it received adequate rainfall and when it did not, or by their inability to retain water (Mohapatra P. , 1988)²⁸. Thus, the cause of famines and the periodic subsistence crises, apart from the fluctuations in the cycles of rainfall, was also due to the quality of the lands upon which were sown the crops, qualitatively precarious and liable to famines at the least of the changes in the rainfall cycles.

²⁸ A number of crop-cutting experiments were taken up in Manbhum. Whereas for Don I lands, the fluctuation between a ‘good’ year and a ‘bad’ one, based upon the rains, was about 50%, for Don II lands, it was 100% and for Don III, 200%. I.e. whereas the maximum yield in Don I lands was 53 maunds per acre, and the minimum 11 maunds, in Don III lands, the maximum was 35 maunds per acre and the minimum, 1 maund (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp 61).

In the analysis of their deficiency, we encounter the question of water as essential. Although one aspect of this may be natural but another, and more important, aspect of this deficiency was social. In fact, rather, the very foundation of the agricultural life of the adivasis of Chotanagpur upon rains was not so much a natural fact than a social, political and economic fact. We have already noted the effect of fluctuations of rainfall earlier. The rivers and the stream were below the contour line of the fields, wherein water rose and fell with the monsoons, and were unreliable (Enayat Ahmad quoted in Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 87; Commission, 1903). The adivasis had developed a means of irrigation through *ahras* and *bandhs* – a method through which the surface run-off of the rains was impounded and channelled through embankments across the lines of drainage, whose “main function was not to increase the intensity of cultivation as is the case with the modern irrigation system, but to provide against the vagaries of monsoon and thus they were essentially protective in nature” (Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 89-90). The usual sites for the *ahras* were the valley-heads and since the catchment area of these was quite small, the capacity of the *ahras* was greatly reduced. The official estimates of the area irrigated in Singhbhum and Ranchi were thus (Table 2.1 in Mohapatra P. , 1988, pp. 92),

District	Year of Settlement	Total Area of Don Land (in '000 acres)	Irrigated Area in Acres	% of Irrigated Area to Total Don Land
Ranchi	1902-10	772	3,036	0.4
Singhbhum – Porahat	1900-03	58	3,900	6.76
Singhbhum – Dhalbhum	1906-11	169	1,708	1.01
Singhbhum – Kolhan	1913-18	221	26,788	12.11

But these estimates were under-enumerated for these figures were compiled during years when the rainfall had been adequate and seasonal. When these cycles were broken, the dependence upon these irrigational systems was greatly increased. According to Mohapatra’s estimation, in Singhbhum, around 10.2% of the total area was the catchment area of the existing tanks and embankments and in Ranchi, around 8-9% (1988, pp. 97-102). D. Schwerin, on the other hand, estimated the area irrigated by these methods to be well under 5% in Singhbhum and virtually non-existent in Ranchi (1978, pp. 29). Inconsistency of the estimates apart, all the commentators consensually agreed to the dismal proportion of irrigated lands in Chotanagpur. Moreover, apart from the already diminished acreage safeguarded by irrigation, the state of irrigation, itself, was

characterized by a sad state of disrepair. The Irrigation Committee had had the “universal testimony that they are everywhere neglected. The heads of the *ahras* silted up. The *bandhs* are worn down and out of repair. In the repair of these *bowls* and the increase of their numbers lies the advancement of irrigation of Chotanagpur”(Commission, 1903, p. 172). Silting and collapsing of the embankments were usual hazards of the system and desilting and repair of the embankments were, ideally, part of the annual agricultural operations. As a result of such annual wear and tear, the catchment area of these irrigational systems was greatly reduced, if not the *ahras* and *bandhs* became completely useless. What were the reasons that such affairs existed at the end of the nineteenth century implying a decline of the native irrigation systems?

In order to answer, we would have to look into the role and position of the various stakeholders who were directly involved with the improvement of land viz. the Colonial State, the landlords and the peasantry, broadly. The *Reports of the Indian irrigation Committee, 1901-1903* provide invaluable insight. The committee had noted that two-third of the division was under the Colonial State directly, “either as proprietor in the case of Government Estates, or as manager in the case of Encumbered Estates or Estates under the Court of Wards” and recommended that “much more might apparently be spent than at present on useful works of irrigation”(Commission, 1903, p. 172). That hitherto, the government had not paid attention to the cause of irrigation and land improvement is also brought out in the statement of Mr. Forbes, who said that the “Government would not be justified in undertaking any of these schemes, or indeed any other irrigation scheme in Chotanagpur”(ibid, pp.173). The reason was due to the problem of guarantee of return on the investment on irrigation and improvement, but then, again, that this was misrepresented is brought out by the fact that there was no law against enhancement of rent obtained from the peasants after investment by the government on irrigation improvement and that it was a prevalent practice by the Government to lease villages to *thikadars* who would, more often than not, enhance rent upon improvement to secure the returns of investment. Wherever the government had initiated land improvement on its own, periodic repair and management of these *ahras* and *bunds* was a major problem. “There was no local proper supervision”, to ensure that the village irrigation systems were repaired, chiefly, because it was not in the interests of the peasantry to ensure their maintenance or even to construct them. “I have seen cases where to get fish the *bunds* have been cut by the raiyats and then patched with a little mud with the result that the *bunds* went the next season”, reported Mr. Slacke to the

Committee. Upon being asked whether this was due to the apathy of the peasantry by the Committee, Slacke replied “that they will work for their own interest is shown by their terracing. Think of the crores of rupees represented by that labour. It is all done by them, because they get a return for their money” (ibid, pp. 227-8). Then why was it not in the interests of the peasantry to improve the irrigation systems?

The Committee reported, quite succinctly, “The chief obstacles are the impecunious and improvident character of the landowners, and the unprotected conditions under which the tenant holds his land. There is as yet no tenancy law in Chota Nagpur, and every tenant is virtually a tenant-at-will, his rent being liable to enhancement at the caprice of the landowner” (ibid, pp. 173). The chief impediment, was, then rent and the fundamental structure of private propriety which had received a major impetus under the British Raj. Slacke, the commissioner of Chotanagpur testified to this bluntly in front of the Irrigation Committee saying “if you make it in the interest of the *rayats* to do so (look after the maintenance of the *ahras* and *bunds*) by making it illegal to enhance a man’s rent on the ground of such improvement, it would be a good thing for the Government...” (ibid:227). What, then, had transpired in the episode of land reclamation and arable expansion in the nineteenth century, was the vigorous extension of arable in the intensive margin, apart from the extensive margin i.e., the lateral expansion of the arable frontier, and simultaneous underdevelopment of the protective irrigational systems²⁹. When the Irrigation Committee posed this discrepancy between the growing Don lands and the decline in irrigation as the question, “Are [these] terraced lands in a better position than the *bunds*?” to Slacke, he replied, “Yes. The bulk of a Zamindars rental is from the rice lands, and therefore the fewer rice land a Zamindar has the less his rental. Consequently, he has a keen interest in inducing the raiyats to increase the area of rice land” (ibid:228).

²⁹ Mohapatra writes,

“The tenants, forced by the need to expand production, went in for terraced rice cultivation in a big way instead of investing in irrigation works, the returns for which were at best unsure. Secondly, we have mentioned earlier, that the nature of irrigation works in Chotanagpur was essentially protective; they did not increase the yield so much as stabilise the fluctuations in it. The tendency of expansion of rice land meant that more of IIIrd class Don lands were being made and though they yielded a higher return in normal years they were, without the aid of irrigation works, inherently vulnerable to the fluctuations in monsoon. The decay of irrigation works only increased those fluctuations of yield (mainly downwards) leading as we have seen to a series of famines in the last years of 19th century...” (Mohapatra P. , 1988, p. 107).

In Ranchi, the difference of rent that was obligatorily and legally paid on Don III and Don II lands was about 60% and, in Bandgaon, 33% (Mohapatra P.:1988: Table 2.16). As and when expansion of arable happened without the attendant land improvement or the improvement of the irrigation systems of Chotanagpur whose sole task was to safeguard the harvests against the vagaries of monsoon, the process of externalization of nature, again, become manifest working through the institution of rent. Better, protected and irrigated rice-lands invited the gaze of the landlord and the obligations of rent and in order to escape this, the adivasis peasantry often evaded land improvement. Until the latter half, generally, and particularly, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, this had not meant famines and subsistence crises of the magnitude that it would spell mayhem and death for the adivasis for there was the resort of the forests to fall back upon. However, in this period, as we saw, even the forests were either decimated or they were closed for the use of the adivasis and the inhabitants and even the vulnerability of the arable had started asserting the precarity of the inhabitants who then, by *freewill*, so to speak had to take to emigration as wage-labourers³⁰. Thus, it is not surprising to find that it was only in ‘bad years’ that the land market transactions also increased significantly suggesting that many peasant proprietors such as Bhuinhars and Khuntkattidars also sold off their property in land and emigrated outside as *wage-labourers* given the dismal record of land improvement (Mohapatra P. , 1990; Gupta, 2009).

In fact, it would be better to say that what had transpired in the nineteenth century as seen from the case of arable expansion is that the very lands which were supposed to be a means of subsistence or rather still, the means of re/production of the adivasi masses, their objective conditions of labour, so to speak, had turned into a *value alien* insofar as they became means through which another class extracted surplus from the peasantry in its re/productive process. Refusal of land improvement although may seem to be paradoxical given that the self-subsistence of the peasantry was inherently linked to it becomes entirely intelligible or even becomes a means of resistance of the peasantry which was aware that it was from its own re/production as workers that another class of the society, predicated in antithesis to the multitude, drew the surplus. Thus,

³⁰As Mohapatra suggests that the only means to avert the crises of famines, periodic subsistence crisis and political upheavals in the nineteenth century were “... a massive investment in irrigation and construction of mid-slope tanks, and an expansion in cheap credit linked with greater commercialization of the crop structure, were obviously not feasible in the colonial context. Thus, emigration on a large-scale remained the only alternative to a high percentage of deaths in epidemics and famines.” (Mohapatra P. , 1985, p. 298)

externalized nature as capitalist private property posed against the interests of the adivasi multitude as but an extension of their structural exploitation; and externalization of nature not just as the separation of man as subject and nature as object but also of man from man, i.e., as class contradiction, or of the worker from herself – thus, again, externalization of nature as a social process *par excellence* inasmuch as it has to do with social subjectivity³¹.

Conclusion – Towards an Immanent Critique

Recapitulating, the processes of externalization of nature highlighted above are essentially those of primitive accumulation. The entelechy of the same is to be seen most apparently in the *phataksor prisons* as the tea plantations came to be known amongst the Adivasi labourers. There, apart from the separation off nature as resources (such as the land, instruments, crop, produce and their own means of subsistence) of the adivasi wage labourer, various acts had empowered the plantocracy to severely reprimand those who deserted, or those who didn't work intensively etc. – in short, to discipline the *predicate*, ensure labour at a specific intensity (Mohapatra & Behal, 1992). The dynamics of the plantations were sustained and re/produced only at the behest of what had and was occurring in Chotanagpur in the nineteenth century marked by a subsistence crisis. Though these looked as *events* in the official discourse as famines, for the people, the subsistence crises become chronic as one sees in the song captured by S.C. Roy,

‘...Men in that blessed ancient Age of Gold
Had naught to do but drink their ale
Now the cursed Kali reigns supreme
Dire deaths from hunger doth prevail
Horrible death from hunger prevails,
Oh, for the days when men no cares did know,
But drank their fill of home brewed ale
Woe to this age when men on earth below
Do daily die of famine’(Roy, 1912, pp. 59-60)

Whether one talks of the underdevelopment of irrigation and intensification of agriculture, rising rental margin or deforestation or the entry of market-dynamism, through commercialization of agriculture, into the region; or the deepening of the logic of private property in the region or its

³¹ Famously articulated by Marx as the twofold character of labour - the separation of labour-power and labour *within* the worker (Tronti, 2019).

interpellation in wider national and international markets – the entire process was tending towards the specific form of proletarianization of the adivasi masses. Hence, as it reads in this paper, *nature* is discussed as much as a matter of natural resources as much as it relates to naturalizing the capital-relation, the re/production of a subject predetermined to produce surplus.

However, this isn't the only reason for us to articulate primitive accumulation in the 19th century Chotanagpur in terms of ecological history and centralize the question of nature. The primary impetus to do so comes from how it was foregrounded by the *praxis* of the Birsaites Ulgulan, c. 1895-1900, a rebellion of the adivasis in the region under consideration. From the apotheosis of *Birsa Bhagwan*, its leader, as *Dharti Aaba*, the father of the land; the concerted offence against rent and for the control over forests; the rich mythology of Birsa Bhagwan who was said to repair *ahras* and *bandhs* singlehandedly and to whom, even the 'bullocks and sheep saluted' - a critique of the processes of externalization of nature was enacted which we have tried to capture here. That is why the precisely why the effect of the prophecy of *sengel da* - when a rain of fire and brimstone would destroy all the dikus and the Mundas who had not resolved to join the *Birsaites* in Chalkad in 1895 - was for the people to stop all agricultural operations, to stop *work*(Singh, 1983). Nature was reclaimed, not in a transcendental sense, but articulated as a fellow rebel or a tool against the *Diku Raj*, thus socialized or rather, proletarianized. The rebellion, in turn, was immanently natural and naturally immanent to the processes of primitive accumulation,

“O men, beware! This world will not end like this or that; it will end in great misery. I will turn deep waters into outlets. I will crush the hills; I will blunt (the edge) of their peaks as of horns. If I challenge the soldiers (enemies) to one side and they run to the other, I will poke them there. I will fill the Earth with water, like the water in the well. Where will they flee? The water during rainy season overflows the ditch from the beginning to end. Big fishes are afloat and make merry in the waters. When summer arrives water dries up. Only a small pool of water remains. Where will they go? The fish, frogs and snake will collect in deep waters at a place. Where will they flee?”(Singh, 1983, p. 167).

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