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Making of Tea Tribes in Assam: Colonial Exploitation and Assertion of Adivasi Rights

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Abstract

The tea garden labourers of Assam known as ‘Tea Tribes’ led a ghettoised life under colonial regime, almost without any protest, though some trivial instances of resistance are reported in the writings of the colonial era. This article describes in brief how the Adivasis from the neighbouring states settled in the Assam tea gardens and were subjected to various forms of torture and sufferings under the colonial regime. It would also trace how the Adivasis fought for the recognition of their rights and status leading to much politicization of their problem after independence. The Adivasi labourers who came to the Assam tea gardens after having faced a crisis in their life that threatened their survival back home responded to the employment opportunity that came their way with the expansion of tea industry in Assam. But after reaching at their new habitats they were subjected to various forms of torture and were kept under slave-like conditions. In addition to various forms of exploitation that they were subjected to, the British planters, in collusion with administration, had systematically grabbed the lands of the indigenous tribal population in Assam almost throughout the colonial period. The unholy alliance between the colonial rulers and the planters ensured steady recruitment and corresponding tortures of the tea-garden labourers. The Government also supported the planters by introducing the ‘black law’ of Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act, which sealed the workers’ fate from taking any recourse to avoid exploitation. However, having suffered injustices and oppression in colonial era, the tea-garden labourers have, in the post-colonial period, increasingly mobilized themselves at political level and have become conscious about their various rights.

The tea-garden labourers of Assam, branded as the ‘Tea-Tribes’, generally prefer to be called as ‘Adivasi’. Embracing Adivasi nomenclature is a deliberate move on the part of the tea-garden labourers to assert their tribal identity as also to represent their collective demand for indigenous rights, including the recognition for achieving the status of ‘scheduled tribe’. Having suffered injustices and oppression in colonial era, the tea-garden labourers have increasingly mobilised themselves at political level and are vigilant about their rights now. In the beginning the British planters hoped that the indigenous people of Assam would become tea-labourers once they lost their lands in accordance with the Wasteland Grant Rules 1838 (Goswami 1999: 68-71). But soon they proved unwilling and unfit to clear jungle terrain in Assam for fear of getting afflicted with diseases like malaia and Kala-azar. So labour for the fast growing tea-estates in Assam was hard to come by. In this situation the British decided to recruit labourers from the neighbouring states of the present day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal. A large segment of Adivasi population who were already at the receiving end of their existence owing to the increasing colonial exploitation and

volatile situation resulting from extreme lawlessness and violence in their regions responded to this opportunity of employment which led to the process of Adivasi migration to Assam for the purpose of serving in tea gardens. The labour-repositioning of tea tribes, which started early in the nineteenth century, lasted well in the decades even after the Second World War and was believed to have generated employment opportunity of as many as three million of labourers (Verghese 2004: 25–26). Having transported from familiar habitats of eastern India, the Adivasi workers in Assam tea gardens soon found their position shackled in all respects as colonial masters had imposed several restrictions on them and forced them to lead secluded life with no interaction with the outside world. The workers were denied contacts with their kinsmen in native place. As a result of this denial the descendents of tea garden labourers in Assam have in course of time settled there permanently and have become a part of the local populace as well as the composite culture of the Assamese society. (Gogoi 1984: 66). Keeping the above realities in view, this article aims to provide a broad historical appraisal of the sufferings experienced by these plantation labourers (designated as coolie in the colonial past) and their struggle for better wages under the colonial regime.

‘Tea’: A Contribution of Indigenous Tribes people of Assam

The introduction of the Assam tea bush to the world is attributed to Robert Bruce, a Scottish adventurer, who in 1823 first noticed tea plant growing ‘wild’ in Assam. Bruce reportedly found the plant while trading in the region. He met the Singpho chief and others who were brewing tea from the leaves of the bush. Robert Bruce died shortly thereafter, without having seen the plant properly classified¹. His brother, Charles, arranged for a few leaves from the Assam tea bush to be sent to the botanical gardens in Calcutta for proper examination. There, the plant was identified as a distinct variety of tea, different from that of its Chinese counterpart (Taknet 2002). Therefore, a plan for the cultivation of the tea plant was mooted in early 1834. Starting with an experimental plantation in Lakhimpur district in 1835, the groundwork for tea industry in Assam was thus laid all through from 1834 to 1850. Tea industry in India has a long history of more than 190 years. Early gardens had come up at Jaipur in the Sibsagar district.² In 1837, twelve boxes of tea were exported to London followed by twenty five boxes in the next year. It was found to be equally good as that of China (www.sentinelassam.com/editorial). The success led to the formation of the world’s first tea company known as Assam Tea Company in 1839. The local authorities were directed by the Governor General in Council to allow the Assam Tea Company to capture as much lands as might be required for the development of the tea industry, under Waste Land Grants Rule 1838. The tea industry rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracts of land for tea plantations. The Assam Tea Company started plantation in Gabharu Hill in the District of Sivsagar, to start with. Jorhat Tea Company was incorporated on 29th June, 1859. By 1852 the prospects of tea began to improve further and in 1859 it was reported that there were nearly 4000 acres under cultivation with an estimated outturn of over 760000 lbs of tea. In 1872, there were about 300 tea gardens in the Assam Valley, out of which Cachar and Sylhet housed 80 and 13 respectively. Tea culture report of 1927 had mentioned that there were 957 gardens in Assam against 941 in the preceding year (www.sentinelassam.com/editorial).

However in the beginning it was not all that smooth sailing for the Assam Tea Company to prosper in tea business. The resident tribes of the region, such as the Singphos were reluctant to participate in clearing the forests. Within a few decades,

tea manufacturers in Assam had covered 54 percent of the market in the United Kingdom and had outstripped China (Fernandes, Barbora and Bharali 2003: 2). The British were forcibly taking over lands belonging to the indigenous people for plantations, since 1861 and the practice continued till the early half of the 20th century. The tribal peasantry belonging to the Tiwa and Bodo-Kachari communities of the erstwhile Nagaon, Darrang, and Kamrup districts suffered worst casualties of the British land revenue policy. The Wasteland Grand Rules, 1838 was introduced which facilitated the first Assam Tea Company to be granted over 33,665 acres of indigenous people's land. Many tea planters encroached and alienated the lands belonging to the Assamese people. Since 1840's, the next few decades witnessed a global investment in far off remote Assam in the tea sector which gradually destroyed the Ahom's feudal institutions and economy and led to the growth of the capitalist economy (Sharma 2001; Saikia 2011). Having reviewed several published sources pertaining to Waste Land Grants and the capitalistic venture of tea industry, it was observed:

Developments in infrastructure like waterways in the 1860s and railways in the 1880s facilitated the expansion of the existing capitalistic ventures in the tea industry and new ventures in coal and petroleum sectors in Assam. In 1890s, the development of trunk railways connecting to the nearest port started in Assam. During this period, the Assamese peasantry started leasing out lands to "time expired coolies." ...The peasants of Assam were constructed as "lazy" and "opium eating" making them averse to extension of cultivation beyond the level of sustainability of their livelihood practices. The "Mohammedan" peasant from Bengal was profiled as "hardworking and prolific cultivators" endowed with the knowledge of cultivating rice and labour-intensive jute. A large number of Nepali graziers migrated into Assam and they introduced sugar cane cultivation. Another group of immigrants who arrived were the Santals (Hilaly 2016).

The tea planters cleared the jungles for tea cultivations. In the process they destroyed most of the forest cover in Assam. The tea industry as well as the timber industry was mainly responsible for the rampant deforestation which permanently transformed Assam's landscape (Sharma 2001; Saikia 2011).

Bonded Coolie and Labour Brokers: Narrative of Exploitation

The Assam Tea Company had at first tried to employ the local tribespeople (such as 'Cacharees'/Kacharis) and others ('Asomiyas') in the tea gardens. But they were not consistent and often deserted tea gardens without notice. The British distinguished Kacharis from caste-Hindus and other 'Asomiyas' in terms of their 'primitiveness', and their capacity for toil (Sharma 2006). Kacharis were unwilling because of their antagonism with the colonial rulers, who had introduced many repressive laws. Kachari peasants from Lower Assam had also taken part in an 'uprising' directed against opium prohibition and a new agricultural tax on garden produce in 1861 (Ibid.). The tea industry grew so fast that there was urgent demand for increasing number of labourers. Agents were sent to collect labourers from different parts of the country. Two types of ruthless labour brokers, called Arkati and Sirdar were appointed as agents. They were engaged initially as commissioned agents in Kolkata to supply labour. First the workers of Chinese origin were brought to Assam; followed by recruitment of thousands of labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chotanagpur were recruited. Tribespeople of Bihar-Jharkhand, Bengal, Odisha regions also a tiny number of non-adviasis from eastern India were also transported by the agent were found suitable. The tribes in peninsular India were

facing serious problems already. Many among them had been uprooted from their community held land by the Permanent Settlement, 1793, which was enforced to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial government. Famine and epidemic during the year 1896–1900 and ‘tribal uprisings’ in the region (led by Sidu, Kanhu and Birsa Munda) and their consequences also prompted the Adivasis to shift to Assam (www.apps.cla.umn.edu/derectory). The agents lured and forced the inexperienced tribes to sign agreements. Catholic Mission Co-operative Society established in eastern India had also facilitated in recruiting labourers (Ekka 2003). In Sardari system, a labourer who already conceded himself went to different areas and brought more labourers. Vast majority of the ‘Adivasis’ recruited as labourers were brought from outside the province by *Arkatis* and *Sirders* as ‘free emigrants’, and then put on a longer Assam contract in Dhubri in Goalpara district—which interestingly was elevated to the status of a labour district, without actually indulging in any planting operations (There was a distinct trend of contracts being enforced for a longer period in this labour district, unlike plantations). The entire process led to a clear case of constrained and forced labour. The labourers, basically being ignorant and poor, were tricked by force and fraud to leave home and to register as labourers under contract in the tea gardens. Once this was done the labourers were in absolute clutches of the manager. There, far away from the public gaze, they lived virtually as slaves. Agents, induced by lucrative remunerations, often kidnapped them or persuaded them to leave their villages under false pretences and brought them to the recruiting depots (www.mcrg.ac.in/T_C_Conference/Subhas.doc).

The aspirations of tea planters to include a greater proportion of labourers within the domain of the Assam contract had led to evading the corresponding rules and regulations. There is a sad incidence wherein seventeen workers had complained of having been forced to sign a five year contract, when they had originally agreed to a three year contract (Assam Labour Report, 1883: 23). Indeed, the bylaws of the 1863 Act were repressive. The contract explicitly empowered the plantation manager (under certain circumstances) to privately arrest the ‘deserting’ coolies. Such an ‘exceptional’ right was justified on the contention that the policing capability of the state in a ‘frontier’ province like Assam was superficial, tenuous and generally weak. (Kolsky 2007).

The unholy alliance between the colonial rulers and planters ensured steady recruitment and subsequent tortures of tea-garden labourers. The Government also supported the planters by introducing the ‘black law’ of Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act. The labourers were brought under legal provisions of ‘Workman’s Breach of Contract Act XII of 1859’ and its amended ‘Act of 1865’. Now, the workers could be punished for striking work and their minimum wage was also stipulated. The implementation of the 1882 Act further formulated the strategies and practices through which tea and coolies became parts of the Assam plantations. These acts ensured the coercion and allowed the planters a free hand in matters related to the workers’ welfare (Singh et al 2006: 47). Fact remains that in the initial decades from the 1850s until around the 1920s, the working conditions were akin to slavery, with flogging, rape, torture and even the throwing of dead workers in rivers (Toppo 1999).

In 1858-59 a large number of labourers numbering nearly 84,915 came to Assam. Thus lakhs of people were brought to Assam. This number increased as the areas of tea plantation increased. During this time large number of Adivasis died due to diseases (Kurmi 1990: 22). Between 1871 and 1901, around 1, 80,000 individuals moved to Assam from the different corners. There are reports of multiple deaths of

early immigrant coolies in Assam. One such report is titled, 'Special Causes of mortality of immigrant coolies, 1891-1901, Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, Calcutta, 1906: 235 (Tinker 1974: 50).

Slavery was abolished in the British colonies in 1834; a veiled 'indentured labour' was however inducted. Indenture has generally been defined as an economically induced migration combined with coercive contractual obligations. The immigrant Adivasi labourers, following the dictates of the labour contractors, became the indentured labourers in reality (Das Gupta, 1990: 51–53). This was the period when the 'coolie' typology constructed outside India was subsequently assimilated into the South Asian plantations and other colonial enterprises (Sharma 2006). Coolies were recruited on payment per head. The coercive character of this merchant-controlled 'coolie trade' had led to resentments and grave protests leading to temporary suspension in 1839. A second method used later was to use the returnees to entice new recruits. This was increasingly prevalent after the 1840s (Chakraborty, www.merg.ac.in/T_C_Conference/Subhas.doc). In the indenture system, the worker had to agree to serve on the plantation for a specified period of time (usually four to five years) and was free to return home after that period. Although this system was an improvement over slavery, which implied a lifetime commitment without any rights, the long distance from their places of origin made it difficult, if not impossible, for workers to return home after the period of their contract ended. This was further mitigated by the low wages paid by the planters that left hardly any savings for the return journey. Hence, in majority cases, these people preferred to remain in the vicinity of plantations even after the period of indenture (Bhowmik 2008; Saikia 2008). Several studies dealing with various issues of tea-labourers are available, even though they remain disconnected.³

'Sahib-Manager' Hegemony, Ghettoized Coolie-Lines and Misery of Labourers

Having reached the tea estate, the mobility of the labourer was restricted within the locality of the tea –estate, which remained completely isolated from the outside world. The migrant tea labourers faced innumerable restrictions. They were ill treated and oppressed by their employer. Within each tea estate the 'Sahib-Manager' and '*Coolie Line-Chaukidar*' formed the two extreme layers of supervisory control. The managerial staff in a tea garden in the late nineteenth century ranged from a sole English Sahib (sometimes Indian) in charge in a small tea garden, to a Burra Sahib (an English official) with a few Indian assistants (*Chota Sahib*) in larger establishments (1000 acres and above). The organization of coolie dwellings in barracks and lines and its policing (chaukidar-monitoring) were guided by the strategies of immobilization and spatial surveillance. These Coolie-lines were numbered, and there was a line-chaukidar for each double row of houses (or lines). Often the Sirdar's gang of men should, are housed in one line; only the women must go with their husbands. This arrangement of having a chaukidar and a sirdar responsible for each line was maintained for conduct of the coolies and to keep them in better order. Large plantations in Assam (with more than one thousand souls) had approximately half dozen coolie lines. These houses were thatched bamboo huts, each partitioned to hold four or sometimes more families (Deas 1886: 68). The fact remains that the precedence established by the British Tea Estate Managers in fixing and controlling the coolies within 'coolie-lines' remains the guiding principle for managers today. The labour- management mechanism in operation in colonial era is simply imitated in

present time. Hence, the Coolie-Lines of today, as this author personally observed remain idyllic ghettoized compounds.

It was mandatory on part of the planters to pay a minimum fixed rate of wage to labourers. However, in the pre-1900 period the wages paid to the labourers were commonly below the statutory minimum rates of Rs. 5.00 and Rs. 4.00 for man and woman respectively. (Behal 1984; Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The wage payments were made under two distinct systems, the *hariza* and *ticca* system and the unit system. The variation between the wages of men, women and children was totally arbitrary and discriminatory. Women and children were paid less than men. The hours of work for women and children were the same as those of men. Women, moreover, performed most types of work done by men like hoeing and pruning. In fact, the women labour was specialised in plucking and their number was fairly large. In peak season, it was estimated, nearly 60 per cent of the labour force consisted of women who were engaged in plucking the leaves (Rana 1984). Plucking, the most labour-intensive job is a delicate and a skilled job, exclusively performed by the women. However, this work is not recognized as skilled work. Hence, the women workers involved in plucking in the tea gardens are considered as unskilled workers (Saikia 2008).

From 1934 onward, when the newly passed Tea District Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932) came into effect, the wage figures were published under two different categories viz., settled labour and *faltu* or *basti* labour. The term 'settled' referred to the permanently employed labour and *faltu* or *basti* referred to the temporary labour force. Child labour in the tea industry is allegedly used in carrying out the plucking, weeding, hoeing, and nursery work. Some claim that children make good pluckers because of their 'nimble fingers', while others argued that plucking is too arduous a task for children to perform. The children are also given the job of removing shrubs that are harmful to the tea plants from the gardens. As there is extensive use of pesticides in the tea gardens, the removal of shrubs with naked hands generally affects the health of the children. A 1992 report on child labour in tea plantations in North-east India observed:

Most of the child workers are employed as casuals. Children are found to do such strenuous work as plucking under very severe climatic conditions; they are assigned to nursery work, fertilization, carrying of heavy loads and household work. They are also made to work in the factories, against established law (Raman 1992; Saikia 2008).

One scholar has observed that with the repeal of Act XIII of 1859 in 1925 and Act VI of 1901 in 1932 the situation had changed, yet the children worked in the plantations with women and men. In fact, the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 prohibited the employment of children under the age of 12 years on any plantation, but permitted and regulated the employment of children of ages 12-14 years as well as adolescents, defined as those between the ages of 15 and 17 years. The Act requires both children and adolescents wishing to work in the tea gardens to obtain 'certificate of fitness' from a certified surgeon. In addition, they may not work more than 27 hours a week, or at night. The Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act of 1986 amended certain portions of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 by raising the minimum age for employment from 12 to 14 years of age. In 1990, the Government of Assam estimated that there were 96,535 children employed in the tea gardens in Assam, constituting over 14 per cent of the total workforce (Saikia 2008).

Life in Tea-Estates: Disadvantaged Tea-Labourers of Upper Assam

The capitalistic tea plantation industry, sustained by an international marketing network, is a steady trade. This business is a labour-driven industry where both men and women form the backbone. The plantation workers nevertheless, in most cases, are treated wretchedly. The hardships of Tea Tribes in tea plantations, narrated in various studies, show how the wages as also the level of food, clothing, housing, sanitation and medical facilities are deficient, particularly for the old and the infirm. Tea estates are virtual forbidden territories and hence it is often difficult to narrate the empirical scenario obtaining inside these estates. The wages of the tea plantation labourers, categorized variously, has increased only nominally since 1947. It is amazing that despite ill-treatment and meagre payments to the vast labour workforce, the tea industry everywhere is crumbling slowly. Assam however may still boast of a stable tea industry compared to degenerating tea-industry in West Bengal and elsewhere.

In Assam, the tea labourers are a disadvantaged lot who for decades have been struggling to get reasonable wages. Indeed, the wage dispute settlements and wage agreements in tea industry of Assam always reflect the supremacy and dominance of the tea industry management. There is treachery even in categorizing the workers and de-recognizing their skill and experience. Workers involved in skilled activities remain placed under 'unskilled' category, and only a small fragment of workers in the tea processing factories are called 'skilled workers'. Majority of the workers are declared unskilled, even though they have and often provide the skilled services. No training opportunities are open to them to make them 'skilled workers'.

To ensure steady supply of labour in the tea gardens was the basic rationale for encouraging adivasi migration to Assam in the early years of tea industry. The idea was to confine them within ghettoized labour-lanes so that they could provide uninterrupted labour services. The wretched type of space management and housing provided to the labourers is part of a recurring and persistent problem in tea gardens. The author had conducted a brief survey of economy of labourers in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam in 2014. It was observed that a good number of labourers have no burden of loan but at the same time they do not have any substantial assets or savings. Thus, their actual status turns out to be that of dependent daily wage labourer, who survives in a very damaging ghettoized environment in the colonies (which are hardly different from former coolie-colonies, with amenities paralleling those of the colonial era). Apart from the slenderness of living space, maintenance and repairing of housing are major issues. Leaky roofs and cracked walls with poor infrastructure can be visible in most of the labor lines. All colonies visited were decades old, though under the Assam tea-garden rules, plantations are required to construct houses for 8% of the workers annually (Assam Rules, section 58, 1956). Many workers have also found that size of the house is too narrow to accommodate growing members of the family. There are instances when to cope up with such pressing demands they have resorted to constructing extensions to existing dwellings.

Despite the fact that there are vacant spaces lying in the vicinity, the labourers are accommodated within constrained spaces. Acute congestions are quite visible in the tea garden colonies. The one roomed houses imply that the tea garden families are forced to live in constrained space, even when children need to be nurtured therein. Living in overcrowded accommodation or housing with shared facilities also puts children at greater risk of infectious disease (Harker 2006). Among the recurring outcomes of overcrowding are the respiratory problems (exposed to tobacco smokes, childhood

tuberculosis). According to one study, unfavourable housing may be attributable to higher rate of tuberculosis and respiratory conditions (Medhi, Hazarika, Shah, Mahanta 2006).

The study conducted by labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, New Delhi (1980) showed the pathetic condition of educational scenario in tea plantation areas even after the Plantations Labour Act, 1951. In fact the high percentage of illiteracy still exists and it covers all, including the tea garden women labourers. Nevertheless, the section 14 of the Plantations Labour Act, 1951 mentions that:

where the children between the ages of six and twelve of workers employed in any plantation exceed twenty-five in number, the State Government may make rules, requiring every employer to provide educational facilities for the children in such manner and of such standard as may be prescribed.

The North Eastern Social Research Centre based in Guwahati conducted a comprehensive study in 2004 across 172 tea gardens in Assam covering individual workers and families. The study brought to light numerous violations of the existing Acts, including inadequate or completely non-existent provisions for drinking water, crèches, schools, proper health facilities, sanitation for women workers (who form the majority of tea industry labour) and shelter (Bharali 2004). Education level of children in the 14-16 age groups is especially miserable in plantations (Fernandes, Barbora and Bharali 2004). It is observed that most children in plantations miss the opportunity of free education on account of neglect from the management whom the law obliges to facilitate the education of children below 12 but they do so only in paper. No teacher in their school is trained. Many are also factory or office workers and spend only a short time in the school. Unfortunately children are deceptively engaged in plantation works, even though the Plantation Labour Act 1951 bans the employment of children below 12. Indeed, the colonial era regulation such as Child Labour's Abolition Act, 1938 bans the engagement of children below 14. Nevertheless, the management tends to view them as 'cheap labour' and ignores the basic duty of providing education to children (Fernandes, 2003). As in many parts of northeast, the Christian missionary schools have made positive impact in the life of the tea tribes. Many Adivasis are Christians and the Church plays a major role in their lives. A team of scholars studied 5,193 members of the 920 families in nine districts. They observed that the only graduates they found were in areas where the Churches had opened schools (Fernandes, Barbora and Bharali 2003: 55; Fernandes 2003).

Another serious issue is lack of sanitation facility. Section 9 of the Plantations Labour Act, 1951 stipulates availability of mandatory sanitation facility in all the tea gardens. It says:

there shall be provided separately for males and females in every plantation a sufficient number of latrines and urinals of prescribed types so situated as to be convenient and accessible to workers employed therein. All latrines and urinals provided under sub-section (1) shall be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition.

Plucking, the most labour-intensive job in a tea garden is a delicate operation which is exclusively the women's work. Given the availability of few childcare alternatives, women who pluck tea leaves often bring their young children with them into the fields. No maternity benefit schemes are available for these women labourers. It has generally been seen that these women undertake physically strenuous work in the gardens even during their pregnancies and post-delivery periods. Further, there are no facilities to

provide pre-nursing care and mandatory leave during the post- delivery period to these women workers.

Condition in Government controlled ATC Tea Estates

Having interviewed 30,000 labourers in 24 plantations in Assam and neighbouring West Bengal, a report prepared by the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School portrays grim life on the tea plantations:

... dilapidated and crowded housing, hazardous water and sanitation conditions, the denial of basic benefits like health care for workers' dependents, widespread disregard for occupational safety measures, and pitifully low wages. Tea worker's rights groups say the Plantations Labor Act has perpetuated the feudal system created by British companies when they first developed the plantations. Today's plantation workers descend almost exclusively from tribal populations transplanted in the colonial era, having inherited jobs from their parents. The manual labor they perform has changed little in 150 years. Workers said managers treated them with contempt. A group of women at one plantation said their supervisors used language with them so vulgar they could not repeat it. Further, the local stereotypes of tribal people as promiscuous figure heavily in taunts (*The New York Times*, 13 February 2014).

During interviews at two of the company's plantations (Nahorani tea estate), workers said their overseers treated them harshly and denied them basic benefits. Ms. Munda, a labourer, said that to qualify for a paid sick day, workers had to report to the plantation clinic three times a day to prove their illness. Raju Mantra, the son of two plantation workers, said that protective equipment was withheld from workers. "When big people come to visit, they give it to us," he said of equipment like gloves and masks to protect from pesticides, "but then they put it back in storage, saying that if we wear it every day, it will wear out". Local advocacy groups say schools on plantations go up to only the fourth grade, and in some schools, there are up to 250 students for each teacher. Most tea workers remain illiterate, the advocates say. Beyond the fences of Assam's plantations, where tea workers seldom go, there is little demand for unskilled labour (*The New York Times*, 13 February 2014). The poverty that besieges tribal populations throughout India more harshly circumscribes mobility for those on Assam's plantations. Many here said they would like to continue going to school or seek care at hospitals outside their plantations, but transportation is too costly for those who earn so little. Plantation workers like Ms. Munda can make 89 rupees (\$1.43) a day picking tea leaves or performing other tasks, provided they meet their productivity quotas. Mr. Mantra said that to get by, most tea workers ate simple meals of rice sprinkled with salt most days, splurging for eggs or fish only on paydays. (*The New-York Times*, 13 February 2014).

There are two types of tea companies in Assam—'big company' and 'propertied tea company', or 'single-owned tea company' or 'family-owned tea company'. Along with foreign companies, the local Assamese people also own a few tea gardens in Assam. Presently, almost 20 per cent of the tea business in Assam is controlled by Assamese tea planters. Since the 1990s, Assam has witnessed a tremendous growth of tea cultivation due to the surrender of the militant ULFA cadres. These small tea growers are concentrated in and around the big tea gardens as the small growers supply green leaf to the big tea garden factories. A majority of the labour force in these small tea gardens is supplied by the big tea gardens. Barring the big tea gardens, a majority of the other tea gardens in Assam face a dearth of funding. The state government has always looked upon the tea industry as a revenue-providing industry. Apart from the privately-owned tea gardens, the Government of Assam also owns tea gardens in various parts of the state. (Saikia 2008).

Pathetic and grim conditions prevail among the tea garden workers of 14 Assam Tea Corporation (ATC) gardens in Assam. Tea workers in Assam are paid much below the government stipulated minimum wage in violation of the Minimum Wages Act. Medical facilities are not available in the gardens. Doctors have also left the gardens due to non-payment of their salaries and the gardens' hospitals are closed. In this anarchic situation workers are to wage a life-and-death struggle. There are cases of death of the workers for want of medical treatment. Asom Sangrami Chah Sramik Sangha (ASCSS) has organized tea workers and is continuously fighting for their rights. It has been able to build organization in more than 30 gardens. In the meantime, activists gathered in front of Janata Bhawan and a mass meeting took place, addressed by the leaders of ATC gardens, ASCSS, AICTTU and CPI (ML). All of them agreed to carry forward the movement and relentlessly fight for workers' rights. A memorandum was endorsed in the mass meeting and was submitted to the govt. representative in the meeting itself. The demands listed in the memorandum were:

1. All the pending wages and salaries of the ATC garden workers and employees should be released immediately;
2. Publish a white paper on ATC garden;
3. Restore the sanctity of law and apply the policy of uniform wages and bonus to every garden;
4. Implement election promises of the Congress and give Sunday wages to the workers; and
5. The Govt. must declare its position regarding the tea workers' demand during the next Assembly Session.

After submission of the memorandum the leaders of the movement met and decided to formally resign from the ACMS and work with the ASCSS. Secondly, they decided to organize workers in other ATC gardens, who had not yet been contacted. To facilitate that they decided to hold conventions in Nagaon and Golaghat. Thirdly, they decided to burn the effigy of Paban Singh Ghatowar in every garden. This way the Congress is losing its ground slowly but steadily and a new struggling centre is gradually emerging (www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2002/june).

Adivasi Nomenclature and Hurdles in Scheduled Tribe Status

At present, the tea-tribe communities of Assam (categorized as 'tea garden Labourers', 'tea garden tribes' and 'ex-tea garden labourers' and 'ex-tea garden tribes') belong to the official central register of Other Backward Classes (OBC), Assam (<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease>). The Tea Garden Tribes and ex-Tea Garden Tribes of Assam argue that their current status as Backward Classes is faulty. They claim that their identity as 'tribes' is at par with any other tribe of Assam, and they resent their de-scheduling. Official statistics say that the tea tribes comprising of tea garden workers and ex-garden workers are scattered in 793 registered tea gardens across the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. The 190-years old Assam tea industry employs about six lakh permanent workers and about six lakh temporary workers. Under both categories about 50 percent are women. There are 97 Tea Tribes in Assam who have been struggling to secure ST status in order to protect their identity and ensuring special measures to improve their condition.

During the British regime, the tea-labourers of Assam were categorized under 'depressed classes'. Four seats were reserved in the house of Provincial Council of Assam, and in 1934-1947 they had four elected members. But in the year 1950 they

were de-scheduled. The Adivasis of Assam are deprived of their Constitutional Rights and the benefits of ST Status including affirmative action (reservation) and positive preferential treatment in allotment of jobs and access to higher education. In order to mobilize the various tea-tribes and bring them under one platform the Adivasi nomenclature was strategically adopted. The origin of Adivasi nomenclature is traceable to formation of the Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA), which got crystallized after Jaipal Singh's visit to Assam in 1955. It is the first Adivasi organization in Assam which started the movement for ST demand in an organized way. To press for this demand they submitted memoranda to the Government and met the then P. M. Mrs. Indira Gandhi. It was through their strong lobbying that the nine Adivasi tribes were about to be enlisted in the ST List in 1987. The process was hampered on the argument that entire 'tea tribes' should be recognized as ST and not just the nine tribes.

The Assam Assembly had passed a resolution to grant ST status to the 'tea tribes along with the six other communities on 5th August, 2004'. The recommendations were accordingly sent to the Centre. Registrar General of India (RGI) raised following questions:

- a) The recommendations failed to present the Adivasis as 'tribes'. (It was mandatory to link the five major characteristics of tribes such as Primitive traits, Distinctive culture, Shyness of contact with the community at large, Geographical isolation, and Backwardness.
- b) The recommendations were that 'Tea & Ex-Tea Tribes' be included in the ST list. The RGI rejected the term "Tea tribe", being unconstitutional.
- c) The list of 97 communities was very confusing and misleading. Recommendations to include some SCs as STs were constitutionally unacceptable.
- d) Recommendations were to include Adivasis and Tea tribes in the same plane as the communities like Ahom, Koch Rajbanshis, Moran, Motok etc. which was unacceptable to the RGI.⁴

In 1978 the Ministry of Home Affairs recommended 14 tribes of Tea garden labour community (the major adivasi tribes) but the Assam Government had disagreed and said that the migrant labour were better off than the local tribes (www.facebook.com/pradip.k.hansda/posts).

All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association of Assam (AATTSA) evolved from Chotanagpur Students' Union (formed in 1974), put forth a 20 points Charter of Demands in 1988-89, demand of ST was one. All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) was formed on 2nd July, 1996. ST demand has been its top most priority in its many memoranda. To press the demand for ST status many mass rallies were organized, altogether 16 AASAA leaders and members sacrificed their lives. In July, 2003 some leaders were shot dead and many other injured and crippled for life. On 24 November, 2007, during the Mass rally for ST demand which ended up as Beltola Tragedy hundreds of helpless AASAA members (boys and girls) were brutally beaten, Laxmi Uraon was stripped naked and chased in public. Hundreds of AASAA members were put behind the bars while carrying out democratic protest in support of ST demand. This incident was reported in media as an outcome of the age-old enmity between the local Assamese community and the tea garden labourers. It was also seen as an ultimate expression of the inbuilt prejudice and class hatred, which characterized the attitude of a sizable section of the Assamese middle class towards the tea garden labourers (Gohain 2007).

There are other Adivasi organizations like - Adivasi Sewa Samity (ASS), Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (including Sahitya Sabhas formed by Kharias, Mundas, Santalis, Uraons/Kuruks, Saoras). Then there are Adivasi NGOs such as All Adivasi Women's Association of Assam (AAWAA), All Assam Santali Students' Union (AASSU). Some politically active militant organizations include Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam (ACMA), Birsa Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi National Liberation of Assam (ANLA), Adivasi Peoples' Army (APA), Adivasi Dragon Fighters (ADF). These militant outfits have been mainly fighting to get the ST status.

Conclusion

The tea garden labourers of Assam, called 'coolies' were brought from eastern India and placed to work under harsh conditions, sexual violence, imprisonment, and poor remuneration. Several scholars have discussed the mechanisms of economic and physical coercion, and the extra-legal authority exercised by the planters within the plantations (Behal 2014: 7). The ruthless British planters in collusion with colonial administration devised a mechanism of labour control that led to unprecedented profits. Not only that the tea labourers were brought to the Assam plantations almost by force and kept under slave-like conditions in ghettoized 'Coolie-Lines', the British planters, had systematically grabbed the lands belonging to the indigenous Ahom, Bodo, Mishing and Koch, during 1861 and the early 20th century, benefitting from wasteland policy. The indentured system of recruitment was carried out by using the 'black law' (Workmen's Breach of Contract Act). Brokers were employed to lure the poor labourers. Arkatti brokers, though unlicensed, recruited labourers from eastern and south eastern parts of India. In 1870 'Sardari' System was evolved so as to engage the previous labourers to lure 'new labourers'. As the government experimented with different mechanisms of indentured recruitment ('licensed contractor', 'arkati', 'sardari', 'de-regulated'), numerous abuses, extralegal coercion, and covert and overt flouting of norms became routine in the Assam plantations. Labourers were forced to live in Coolie Lines which were overcrowded. In these barracks each tea garden labourer got hardly twenty five square feet of area. The labourers were not allowed to remain absent in their duty for a single day even when they were unwell. The labourers did not enjoy any personal freedom at all. Low wages, poor housing and lack of avenues for social mobility have been a recurring theme since the inception of the plantation in the early 19th century. By paying very low wages the tea planters forced the whole of family members to work in the tea garden. Under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (Act 3 of 1859) a labour was liable to prosecution, and even imprisonment for breach of contract. Inertia, refusal to work and desertion was equally punishable offence and for that they may be flogged physical torture and imprisoned under the various provision of this act. Flogging was common practice in the tea gardens. The then Chief Commissioner of Assam Fuller stated about the condition of labours, '...They were deprived of all their freedom and their derogatory conditions and atrocities remind one of the slave running in Africa and the global slave trade'. Thousands of Adivasi labours died annually due to non-availability of Medical care as the medical system was very poor in the tea gardens of Assam (www.revolvy.com/main/index).

Collective resistance and individual protests were not infrequent in the tea estates in response to managerial violence, judicial discrimination, and sexual harassment, pervading under the exploitative indentured system. For the management, however, these were 'desertions', 'abstentions', 'cheating', 'shirking', or other forms of 'criminal' activity encouraged by outsiders. Behal has discussed the long history of labour

resistance and protests against the Assam plantation regime, gleaned from 'colonial documents' (Behal 2014: 253). The author suggests that it was only in the last days of indenture, and especially in the backdrop of Gandhi's civil disobedience movement in 1920-22, that worker struggles took on organized shape and were categorized as 'riots', 'revolts', and 'strikes' in official accounts (Dey 2015). Out of the 210 reported cases, of conflict, between the planters and workers from 1904-05 to 1920-21 as many as 141 were cases of so-called 'rioting' and 'unlawful assembly', arising from the issue of inadequate remuneration and worsening economic conditions. Among the first such protests, mention may be made of protest of 1884 in Bowalia Tea Estate and another strike in Helem Tea Estate in 1921. However these protests were ruthlessly suppressed. The tea garden labourers never got any form of help or encouragement from Caste Hindu dominated Indian National Congress leaders of Assam. Congress leaders of Assam never tried to expand the freedom movement to the tea gardens. Instead in many cases they helped the planters to suppress the unrest of the labourers (www.revolvy.com/main/index).

Even after the formal transfer of power in 1947 and enactment of the legal provision of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1952 nothing really changed in the life of the labourers. Several NGOs and two strong Trade Unions also could not make any positive impact. Having suffered injustices and oppression in colonial era and visualizing no respite in contemporary era, the tea-garden labourers got increasingly mobilized themselves at political level and became vigilant about their rights. Consequently, sustained movements were launched by the Tea Tribe-Adivasi organisations during last five decades seeking better wages and recognition as scheduled tribe, but the administration has routinely sidelined the basic demands of vulnerable tea garden labourers citing awful reasons. The reasons cited by Registrar General to deny ST status to Tea Tribes of Assam seem ludicrous. Indeed insisting application of five notorious and unscientific 'characteristics' to determine the legitimacy of tea-tribes is a deleterious strategy.⁵ Using such indicators probably only the Jarawas will fit as 'scheduled tribe'. Those five notorious characteristics will hardly match with any tribe of mainland India today. Here lies the failure of Indian anthropology to salvage the situation and involve proactively in fighting for granting the 'scheduled' status to tea-tribes whose kinsmen in Jharkhand and elsewhere continue to benefit from those constitutional statutes. The Indian government needs to revise many of its absurd policies toward vulnerable communities such as the 'tea tribes' and suitably revise the 'unscientific' approach it has adopted to define the tribes of India.

Notes

¹Robert Bruce learned from Maniram Datta Barua, a local resident, that a certain community of tribe known as Singhpo grew tea that was earlier unknown to the rest of the world. Bruce realized its quality and potential to offer competition to Chinese variety. In 1823, he met the Singhpo chief Bessa Gaum. He was allowed to take away sample plants and its seeds. He died in 1824, but opened Assam's doors to a great industry. He was buried in the cemetery in Tezpur (Taknet 2002).

² Historical narratives of tea plantations in India and especially in Assam are available in works of Griffiths (1967), Antrobus (1957), Bose (1954), Buchanan (1966), Guha (1977) and Borpujari (1963, 1977). These are specific theme based studies and hence are often disconnected. Behal and Mahapatra have examined the working of the indenture system, through which thousands of tea workers were recruited in the period between 1840 and 1908, exposing its inhumanity and scant regard for human life (Behal and Mahapatra, 1992). Behal (1984) examined the forms of

labour protest in the Assam Valley tea plantations between 1900 and 1947 and analysed the reasons for the retarded growth of labour unions in the context of repressive strategies adopted by the planters. Among ethnographic monographs mention may be made of R.K. Kar (1981).

³The Adivasis' demand to grant them the Scheduled Tribe status has been made at several platforms. *Johar Times* started this petition with a single signature, and now has 182 supporters. The petition of *Johar Times* was forwarded to the prime minister and the ministry of home and tribal affairs (www.change.org). The Centre has not accepted the Adivasis' demand of the Scheduled Tribe status on the grounds that they 'have tended to lose their tribal characteristics in their new surroundings'. They adivasis argue that they have not lost their tribal characteristics as they speak their mother tongues, the adivasi language, retain their food habit, celebrate and observe the lifecycle rituals which are basically tribal. At inter-tribal level, they speak Sadri dialect, also referred as Nagpuri, as the lingua franca. Santali, Mundari, Kurukh, Saora, Kharia are other Adivasi dialects, which have survived and are preserved through forming tribal sahitya sabhas. They argue that basic traits that define a Assam tribe are possessed by them.

⁴The criterion followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribes are 'indications of primitive traits', 'distinctive culture', 'geographical isolation', 'shyness of contact' with the community at large, and 'backwardness'. This criterion is not spelt out in the Constitution but has become well established. It subsumes the definitions contained in 1931 Census, the reports of first Backward Classes Commission 1955, the Advisory Committee (Kalelkar), on Revision of SC/ST lists (Lokur Committee), 1965 and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendment) Bill 1967 (Chanda Committee), 1969 (www.tribal.nic.in/Content/DefinitionProfiles.aspx).

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A Visual Journey into Santal Village Life

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Abstract

The authors have primarily selected Rasunchopa village, situated at a distance of 27 kms from the steel city of Jamshedpur, in the Potka Block of East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. This village is famous as a heritage of rich Santal culture. To capture the nuances of their rural life, the authors make a double journey as if, travels into the village from Jamshedpur to conduct the field work for collection of materials through photography and interview, followed by a journey through time to capture the dialectics of Santal life. This presentation is divided into two interlinked facets of Santal life, that of a familial home and the community home, that is the village. The visual journey is complemented by suitable narratives for a closer understanding of Santal rusticity.

Introduction

The authors of this piece, representing INTACH Jharkhand Chapter Research Team made several visits to Rasunchopa village of Potka block (enroute Jamshedpur–Hata–Haludhani–Tiring–Rairangpur connecting Jharkhand and Orissa) during 2013-15. The original purpose was to investigate the process of labour migration to the Steel factory at Jamshedpur. During our fieldwork, we could find that mainly Santal villages in the neighbourhood were the key labour supply hub. The labour would daily cycle several miles to reach their workplace. Till date villagers work as permanent or daily wage workers in large numbers taking the advantage of accessibility by road.

We learnt that among these villages, Rasunchopa village continues to serve as the main source of labour pool. This made the village our principal place for further investigation. We were fascinated by the sight of their distinct style of house-making. We started exploring further by interviewing the *Jogmajhi* and *Nayke Baba*. The village head or *Majhi* or *Pradhan*, Sasodhar Hansdah acted as our principal resource person who revealed the changing technology of house-making and also the rural ambience and Santal worldview. Sonia and Devla took the lead in taking interviews and photography. Few photographs and interviews were taken from other Santal villages like Pindrebera, Dudhchuan, Harda, Nunia, Butgora, Patharbhangra etc.

Later, library work was conducted at the Tribal Research Institute, Ranchi and Kalamandir, Jamshedpur. These facts are presented in the following pages beginning with a short introduction about the socio-economy of Rasunchopa village. As the forests are gradually disappearing, economics based on the forest also tend to become rarer and rarer. Hunting is no longer practised in this village and most of the adjacent areas. Motorbike and tractors are quickly replacing bullock cart, bicycles in this village. But

still the forest provides the Santals with some important articles, namely, wooden poles for building and agricultural implements, leaves for making leaf cups and plates, various types of roots and tubers used both as food as well as for medicine. It is quite understandable that in the past, when the hillocks and surrounding area was completely wooded, there was a greater dependence on the products of the forests like Mahua, Kendu, Karanj, Neem, Ashok, Shirish, Piyal (*Chaar/Chiranji*).

In economic life, though they are more or less self-sufficient in the production of their staple food the Santals in Rasunchopa had to be dependent on a number of artisan communities for essential manufactures. The potter (*Kumhar*) and Black smith (*Lohar*) used to make useful wares and tools like ploughshares, sickles, arrow-heads, hoe-blades, picks, etc., the *Dom* and *Mukhis* make the essential basketry goods, the Cobblers (*Chaamar* or *Ruidas*) make leather items, and so on. Community leaders and elderly people confirm that formerly trade of forest or agricultural produces and even clothing were conducted through barter, but today, all transactions are done through money only. Nonetheless, it has to be mentioned that very few local products are still transacted through the barter system.

Tatanagar, Mussaboni, Ghatshila centres attracted a substantial number of poor Santal labourers, who, however, mostly occupy the unskilled ranks. They have not been able to adjust their habits to wage-earning economy and are often unable to utilise the hard-earned money beneficially. A large proportion of the money is spent in liquor and the purchases of unessential fashionable goods. With large amount of currency in their hand they often did not find the right or useful way to spend their money. Non availability of schools, colleges and hospitals denied them the basic facility of a civic life had a deleterious effect. The traditional village system became vulnerable and was slowly eroded. The lure and pitfalls of urban development didn't help wither. These factors combined to ruin their socio-economic and cultural base.

The Santals in Rasunchopa now live a settled agricultural life. Moreover, being conveniently connected by road with Tatanagar, it is a major source of labor supply tribal. A section of inhabitants have moved to Jamshedpur and its adjacent areas in search of livelihood in industry and construction work. Composition of the village also took drastic changes due to the passing of State Highway through its heart. Being connected through Hata-Tiring-Rairangpur road, which is a lifeline route between Orissa and Jharkhand, the villagers were exposed to outer world faster.

Housing pattern: A product of age old knowledge and traditional technology

There are indications that the pattern of houses of these people has undergone considerable changes in the last fifty years. The single-sloped houses were slowly converted into two-sloped and thatched with wild grass were given the structure of walls being made of upright bamboo or thin *Saal* logs being placed side by side at a distance of 5-7 feet. With the passage of time, they adopted the technology of plastering the walls with mud. Now-a-days along with two-sloped thatches, we also find thatches with four (*Chaar Chala*) or even eight slopes (*Att Chala*). The wild thatching grass has largely given way to paddy straw or country tile (*Khapra*), manufactured on the potter's wheel at the village by Kumhars who were offered settlement by the Manjhi. The walls are principally built of rubbles, grass, mud. The houses are kept clean by regular plastering with mud and cow-dung solution; the walls are painted with broad bands of yellow, black or white, giving a very colourful appearance. Very often, these broad bands are further decorated with graphic or line drawings. Sometimes we see animal figures and

flowers too. The colours are made from locally available materials; the red and yellow are obtained from red and yellow ochre; the white made from soapstone and the black from burnt straw. Thus even to-day, in erecting their houses, the Santals are basically dependent on locally available materials. However, in the past 30 years concrete houses with asbestos roof or concrete roof have come up specially near or along the State Highway.

The clan makes their housing in different patterns such as

Chatom Orah(Umbrella type House with bamboo, hay stacks),

Kotha Orah(Large House),

Bangla Orah (Bungalow type House with window, verandah, parapet etc).

The walls are made of Murom, mud. Along with mud a mixture of hay dust or paddy flex or straw is mixed. Hay and *Saagah* (a grass found in the forest area or grass land) is used for making the roof of the house. The walls of the house are coated with mud plaster. The women draw pictures of flowers, trees, sun, moon etc. on the walls painted with natural colours. Pictorial representation of folk tales and folk songs are also imprinted on the walls. We notice a perceptible change in the sizes and patterns of Santal houses, when substantial structures gradually came up. When the foundation of such a house is laid, the villagers prepare a layout or map:

Northern part is *Jonom* (birth part)

Southern part is *Moron* (death part)

Eastern part is named *Sinachando* (referring sun)

Western part is *Needachando* (referring moon).

The length of the house is generally 7 *Haath* (approximately 10 feet), 9 *Haath* (13 ft.) or 11 *Haath* and the breadth should be 5 *Haath*, 7 *Haath* or 9 *Haath*. It is always rectangular not square. The house is divided into:

Bonga Orah i.e place of worship

Gitich Orah i.e the bedroom

Gora Orah i.e the cowshed

Daka Orah i.e the Kitchen



Mud and Cowdung mixture, Amadubi



Floor Plastring with mud, Amadubi



Cow-dung liquid on mud plaster, Amadubi



Painting walls with natural colour in Rasunchopa, Potka Block



Walls painted with natural colours, designs of flower etc.
(site: Pindrabera, Gamharia block)

Architecture of a Santal House

We notice a perceptible evolution in the architecture of a Santal house from the very modest *Jhanti* (leaves, shrubs) type to more substantial structures comprising of bamboo/timber logs, mud etc. This may be ascribed to the changes in their socio-economy and their exposure to the outside world. How and when this transformation exactly occurred is not known to the community living in Rasunchopa. Another noticeable fact is that changes were generally commensurate with the basic cultural ethos of the Santals. The old structural forms co-existed with the new type of houses. This shows the crystallisation of different socio-economic layers within the community; the former belonging to the socio-economically marginal families, while the latter to the more affluent.

Jhaanti: the early housing structures

The bamboo and *Sagaah* (a kind of shrub sticks) are used as its structural material. *Jhanti* is the original and primitive style of house making. As the pictures show the essential components were bamboos, branches of trees, hay and even mud. There would be no window or formal door/ threshold, roof, courtyard, etc. Few bamboos dug post in line would make a rectangular or square area within a 5' to 10' width and 10' to 15' Length. On top bamboo poles will be fixed tilted on one side. branches of trees and hay will be spread to make a roof. Presumably, this represents a stage of Santal life when their forest dependent economy had not consolidated to provide the material basis for a more substantial houses.

This may also be because of the clan which was in the state of migrancy and did not think of finally settling down at the particular site. Obviously, the modest structure was enough for the inmates and their cattle. They started making substantial houses only when they found that they could live in the chosen site safely and could collect the buildings' materials easily from the adjacent forest accounting for enough food.

A Visual Journey into Santal Village Life



Jhaanti : Dudhchuwa, Dhalbhumghar Block



Jhaanti with hay roof Janumdih, Potka Block

KUMBA: towards more stable housing

It is assumed by the community leaders that they started building mud walls sometimes between the end of 19th and early 20th century. If Jhanti style housing were symbolic of forest dependent nomadic lifestyle of the Santals during that period depending more on foraging and hunting, the shift to mud houses occurred when they had moved decisively towards settled agrarian life. Interestingly during these years, forests in the Singhbhum region were increasingly brought under state control since the framing of the Forest Act in 1865 that curbed people's unhindered access to forests. Shrubs and wood for construction was subsequently not abundantly available also due to the opening up of mining and industrialization.

Kumba happened to be the next structural type that the Santals developed. This was constructed with better and stronger building materials like mud, grass mixed with murom (gravel) and Saal logs or bamboo poles which were used as column and beam. One side of the structure was kept higher to make a sloping single roofed. *Kumba* had the better strength to wither the nature's wrath. This change was coeval with the community turning towards less nomadic and more settled and community-managed village life. Incidentally, it was readily available from the vicinity of the villages and began to be used for building houses.

Visual representation of the change: Jhanti to Kumba

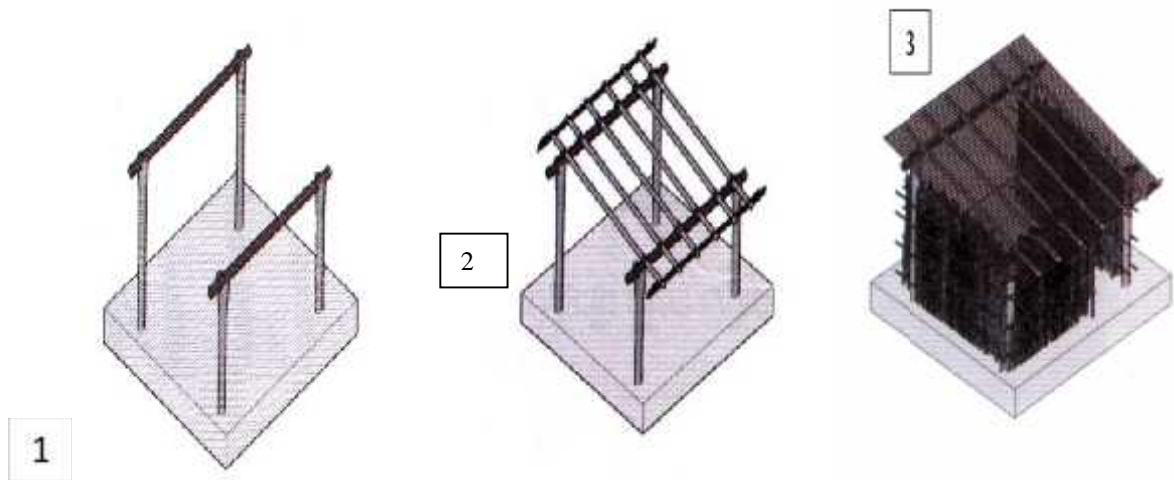


Dhalbhumghar
Jhanti style still prevailing among poorer Santals



Bahragora
Jhanti has been transformed into *Kumba*

Structural design of Kumba



Source: Gauri Bharat, 'Transformation of Santal Houses', *BAHA Magazine*, December 2014 Issue

One side or both side slanting roof with tiles or Tiles or hay stack



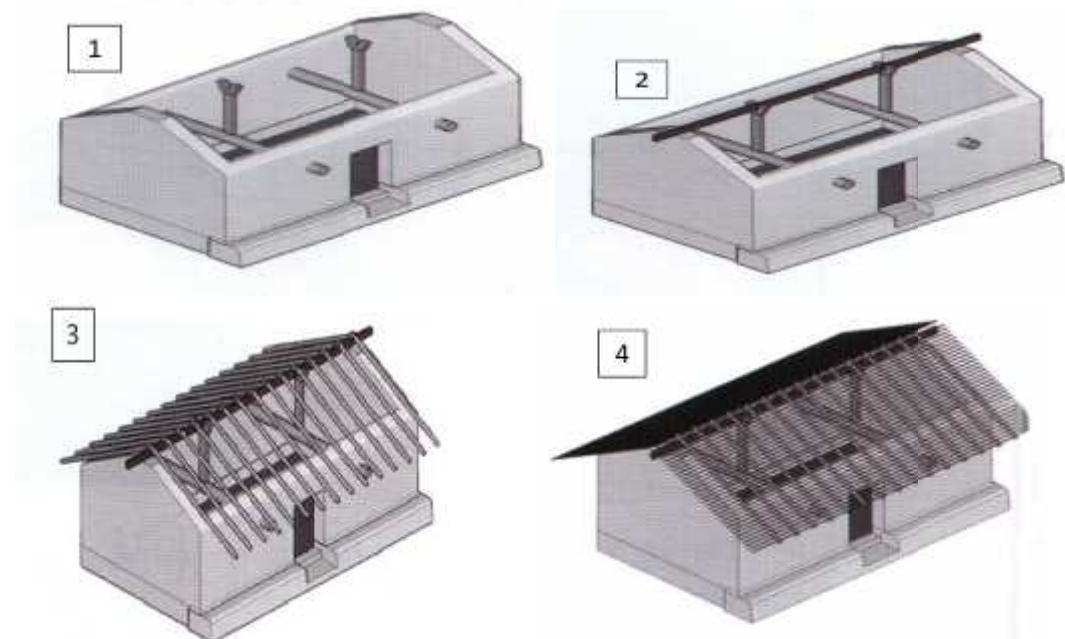
Clean and smooth walls with organic colour on it are symbolic of a Santal house (Buruj Khunti) in Dumuria

Buruj-khunti Orah

Buruj-khunti Orah is the sum of two words Khunti meaning a post or a piece of wood and 'Buruj' i.e. a wall all around or a tower. Therefore, the type of house that has a high central post to support the roof is called by the specific name. The truss is made by one or more beams (orah) placed across two poles along both side walls. Central post/s

(Buruj Khunti) is/are placed at perpendicular on both beams. A long timber log (*pidh* or ridge beam) is placed on its top. This completes the truss to support the roof.

The ridge beam is the combination of two beams of given size. Thus, the length of roof and room can be increased. Use of Buruj is the result of contact with the Turks who had invaded Santal territory in the past. This is reflected in their folklore. In their famous story of Dasai dance they have reference of ‘Turk’ king whose army kidnapped two strong Santal women named Kajol and Ayon.



Source: Gauri Bharat, ‘Transformation of Santal Houses’, *BAHA Magazine*, December 2014 Issue



Buruj –Khunti housing with Hay roof



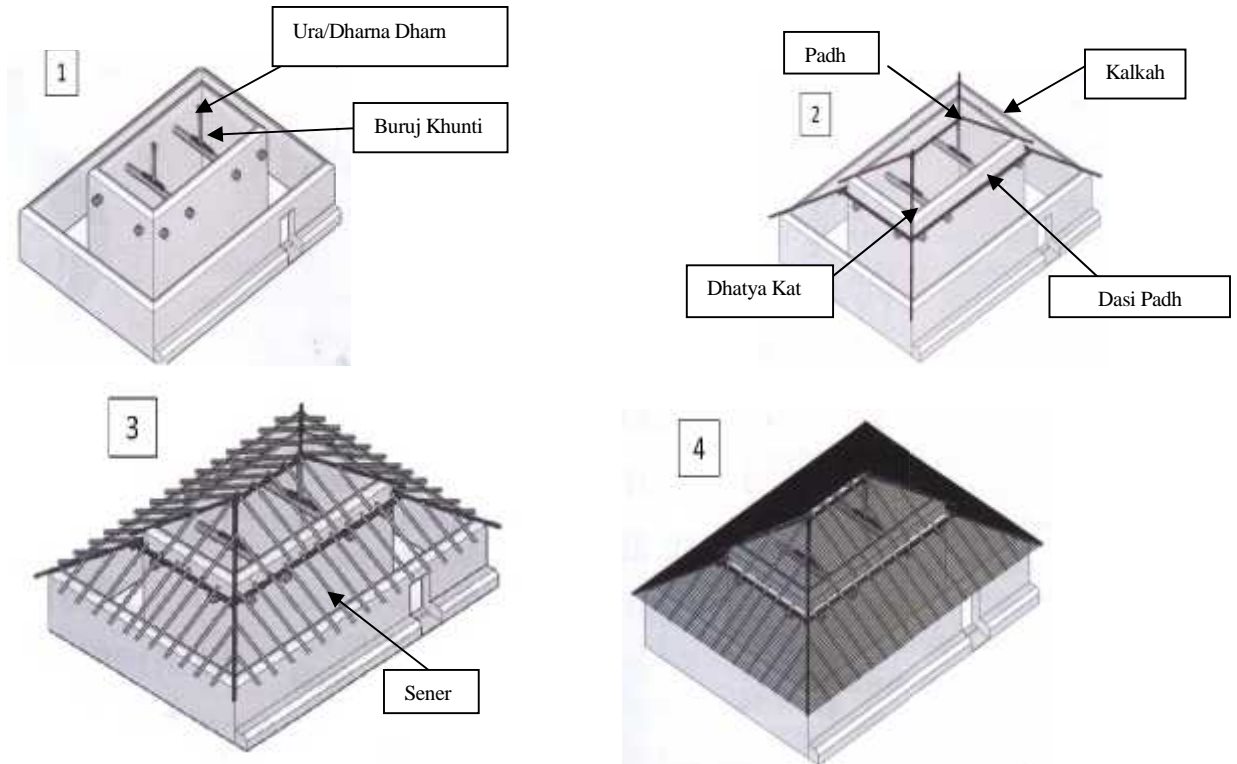
Buruj –Khunti housing with Tiles roof

ATH-CHALA (the House with eight sloping roofs) - Structural Design

With the inception and spread of *Buruj Khunti Orah* among affluent Santal families, some modified pattern of structures became popular. These are the *Buruj Khunti Orah* having eight slanting roofs known as *ath-chala*. However, the common type is the house with four slanting roofs called *chaar-chala*.

In the *ath-chala*, the *padh* (ridge beam) is supported on *Buruj Khunti* to take the central load bearing. *Buruj Khunti* is erected vertically on ‘*Ura*’/ ‘*Dharna*’ (beam/connector of two- side walls). The *Padh* (ridge beam) is connected with *Kalkah* (a type of beam that creates the slope). The truss is bound at middle level by frames named *Dhatya kat* and *Dasi padh* to hold it and the roof. *Seners* are the beats or

thin frames coming down to connect *Dasi padh* and *Dhatya kat* and to hold hay stack or *Khapra*.



Source: Gauri Bharat, 'Transformation of Santal Houses', *BAHA Magazine*, December 2014 Issue



Roofs of Aat Chaala house, Patharbhang, Potka Block

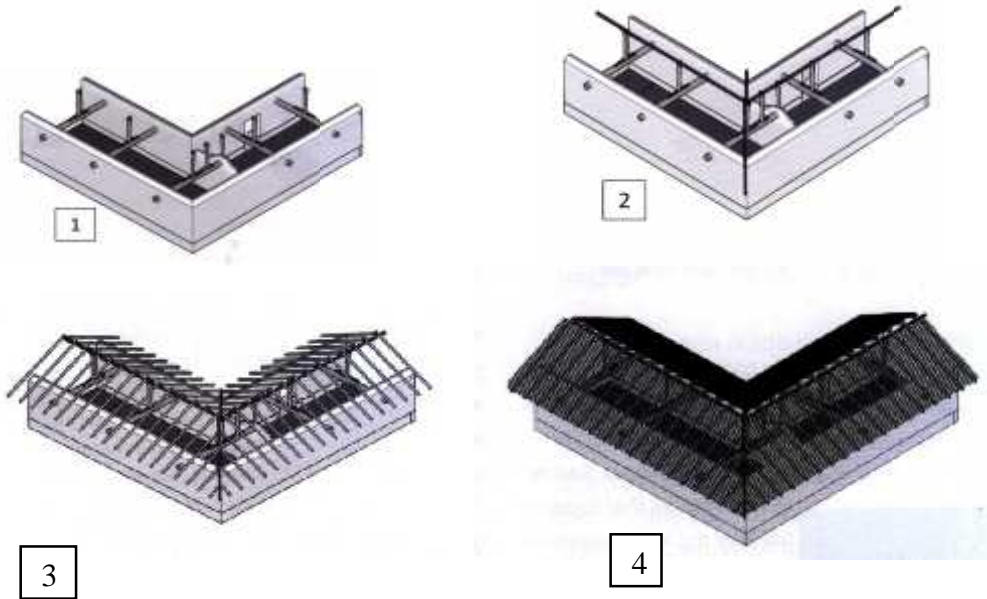


Roofs of Chha Chaala house, Dumuria Block

***Raacha Orah/ Gitich Orah* (Courtyard house/ Bed Rooms)**

Gitich Orah means Bed Room, *Daka Orah* means kitchen, *Raacha Orah* means Courtyard houses. In these structures, two *Buruj Khunti* structures are built perpendicular to each other on a horizontal plane in the inside courtyard. Inside the truss, beside *Buruj khuntis* on both wings, one of which is erected on a beam connecting the corners to support two perpendicular beams.

A Visual Journey into Santal Village Life



Source: Gauri Bharat, 'Transformation of Santal Houses', *BAHA Magazine*, December 2014 Issue



Harda: Dumariya Block
Hay roofed Courtyard House



Hesra: Dumariya Block:
courtyard House with Tiled Roof



Nuniya: Dumariya block
Tile and Hay Construction

A Santal village is often an Architect's delight



In a Manjhi Orah (Headman's House) at Kaliyam kocha, Block-Dumuria, East Singhbhum
Raacha Orah (Courtyard House)

Housing style of the Santals is unique

The lifestyle of the santals corresponds to their housing architecture, system, colour-sense and planning. Space management, drainage, water passage are also taken care of.



Ghagda, Dumuria Block: Agricultural practices



Pindrabera, Gamharia Block: Grafic Art on walls

Staying in a Santal village is heavenly experience

A Santal house is often a piece of art. Soothing earthly colours, organic colour bands, graphic designs are put in best possible elegant way. They call it *Bhitti Chitra* (Mural). Lines, colours and motifs bear unique stamp of Santal culture.



Dumuria Block, East Singhbhum District: Grafic Art on walls



Pindrabera, Gamharia Block, Seraikela-Kharsawan District: Grafic Art on walls

Village organization among the Santals

Oh My Land!
This will be our Land!

Migration coupled with the formation of new settlements is an integral part of the history of the Santals. Mode of intended migration and settlement at a new place has much to do with village organization among them. In the past, a group of Santal families would migrate from their original habitat to some other place where they might find some unclaimed land that could be brought under plough. The migratory group often consisted of closely related families, other than families of other clans from the same village of origin. Before settling down at a particular piece of land, the migratory groups made careful divinations and observed various rituals. Accordingly, then they established the village along with *Jaher Sthal* (Santal worship place). Shasadhori Hansda says 'in a village, the Santal families are clustered in a particular tola/s; if minority, then away from the main village and constitute a separate social –ritual entity'. They normally inhabit in a cluster of villages, which grow with the expansion of families. Their villages are settled at the outskirts of forest (*Veer*) land or forest fringe areas flanked by hill (*Buru*) as depicted by the following pictures.



Lakhaidih, Kherbani Panchayat, Dumuria



Dhalbhumgarh Saal Forest



Narwa nadi (Yamuna)

Establishment of A Santal Village

After the selection of a suitable site or territory, the inception of a *Santal* (A Santal is also known as *Kherwal* i.e. predecessor of *Kher* meaning birds) village used to begin with the allotment of lands among the community members i.e *Gosthi* or accompanying families. A village boundary was also defined from top of a hillock. It was followed by the selection of the headman (*Manjhi Haram* or *Manjhi*) and a priest (Naiyke). The establishment of *Jaher Thaan* and *Manjhi Thaan* (the sacred places where the sacrifices to specific deities are offered) used to be the next step.



Manjhi Thaan at the right corner

The important village offices like headman and the priest were selected from original group of settlers themselves after seeking popular opinion of the settlers. The office bearers were granted rent free land which passed from parietal side, though the clan was the real owner of land. The village offices, including that of priest, generally passed to the eldest son or, in his absence, to the nearest patri-kin. Shasadhori Hansda, elaborates that the priest may be selected by the community by identifying a possessed individual through whom the *Bonga* (*it is a santal word for God*) expressed his choice.

There was earlier a social practice of expelling or discontinuing with the inefficient officials and selecting new ones in their place. Sometimes, a village official might himself offer to relinquish the office for personal reasons. It was revealed that in the past all the village officials used to formally relinquish their offices and land at the time of *Magh/Baha* (months of February-March) festival. Their terms used to be renewed on the request of villagers. The Santal village organization generally follows the same pattern that was originally established at the time of settlement. There may be some minor alterations to suit the exigency. The duties of the village officials and their privileges are passed on orally to next generation of the clan by elders.



Practicing religion and rituals under guidance of Naiyke

Naiyke performing a ritual practice: Baha festival

A Visual Journey into Santal Village Life

The Santals (*Hor Samaj*) are bound by a strong sense of social and cultural identity. They sit together to listen, to understand and to decide collectively. Kochar writes ‘The attributes of tribal identity viz., linguistics, cultural, social, religious practices are conceived in terms of community practices, under community authority and for a community life. Everything that is of some significance to the community derives its validation from the context of community life. Despite vigorous contact with external/urban populace since two or three centuries, the main reason, why they have been able to keep up their traditional values and norms, is their strong and almost inseparable bond with the community and its culture’.



The Gramsabha in Phuljhuri Village, Potka, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand

The Village Governance *More –Hor or Village Council*

The village is governed by a hierarchy of village officials or the village council, led by the *Manjhi*. The Santal headmen are often economically and socially better off partially due to some economic advantages associated with their office. He is the final arbitrator for all disputes. Headman used to hold considerable authority in the village and the villagers were expected to obey his commands. Any individual can file his complaint to him against any individual in the village. In practice, he convenes village council meetings as and when he or community needs it. The decision is taken by the council and not by the headman alone, though he may significantly influence the opinion of the council. It is the duty of the headman to see that sanctity of the traditional rules are maintained and justice is done to community or individual. The punishment decided by the council are often executed in terms of fines (eg Handia or country made rice beer for the entire village and / or cash) imposed on family of the individual. Manjhi often receives one-fourth of total fine collected. He cannot punish anybody of his own accord, nor has he any compulsive powers vested in him. He represents a collective conscience of the community and cannot exercise any force, except through the council. If anybody fails to comply with the decision of the council, the headman reports it to the village council with his recommendation. All matters of `significance to the village and the community are brought to his notice. His participation and opinion is very much desired. The headman participates in all important village affairs, like birth, marriage, funeral rites, etc. in any family of the village. It is a practice that the headman would be attended

first on formal occasions, such as when salutations are offered in gathering, when rice-beer is served, when purification rites (such as shaving, anointing) are performed. The dates for festivals, village worships, marriages and communal hunts are finalised by the headman after consulting other persons in the village. The formal dances and the ceremonies involving the whole village are started in the house of either headman or head priest according to traditional rules.

The marriage parties have to go to headman's house first. He makes brief speeches at all formal occasions. In all matters in which other villages are involved, the headman should be regarded as the spokesman. He is the representative of the community and villagers in any negotiation in the village or related to other villagers. He is expected to protect the interests of the members of his village. In case of serious breach of conduct by a resident of another village, the headman sends or himself leads the mission to demand the justice. *Manjhi Haram* (Headman) offers sacrifices to *Bonga* (God) at the *Manjhi thaan* (a worshipping place at the courtyard of Headman) on behalf of the whole village and on behalf of himself at scheduled occasions. At the time of marriage, he should be given a rupee by the groom's party. Special share is given to him from the game hunted during collective hunting.

The duties, obligations and privileges of the headman, given above, are the traditional norms. In practice, role of headman may not meet the expectation. There are formally elected *Manjhi* in Santal villages who abstain from any village affair. Naturally, he does not hold any authority in the village matters. This type of *Manjhi* is often absent from the village meetings due to his incompatibility with new pattern of political or social leadership that has emerged to undermine his role and status. Even, villages along the highway or road from where daily wage earners go outside the village do not follow such customs anymore.

At Rasunchopa village, however, Sasodhar Hansda participates in all the affairs of the village, takes part in meetings and shows interest in the village matters. He takes the decisions, convenes the village council and conducts the general affairs of the village. He continues to represent Rasunchopa in inter-village affairs.



Meeting of Village Council : hearing of family dispute

Generally, in a Santal village only males are present in the general meeting. But in above picture presence and participation of large number of women participants in a general meeting substantiates social transformation among the Santals.

The Jog-Manjhi

O'Malley and Culshaw have described the *Jog-Manjhi* as the 'guardian of morals'. Being deputy to the headman, he passes on the decisions of Village Council to villagers. His special function is, however, to preside over the marriage ceremonies. He and his wife used to perform the duty of the moral guardian of the village youth. We are told that in an ideal case 'the Young men of the village would sleep, in the house of *Jog-Manjhi* on the final day of Sohrai festival'. Likewise, 'the wife of Jog-Manjhi acts as a moral guardian over the young girls of the village (Culshaw, 1949:9). However, in practice we found that such a practice has been abandoned by villagers now a day. *Jog-manjhi* plays very important role at the marriage ceremonies from the beginning till the end. He directs the villager on various kinds of works in connection with marriage. He guides the marriage parties, especially the bride and bride-groom at various ceremonial rites. He is kind of secular priest for marriage and festive rites and ceremonials.

The Paranik

The *Paranik* is an assistant to the headman. His functions are not precisely laid down except that in the absence of the headman, he may be called upon to perform the duties of headman. In most of the villages, he does not hold any significant position even if the Manjhi is a defunct member. In some places, there may be an assistant to Paranik called *Jog-Paranik* Campbell reported that Jog-Paraniks' duty was to assist Jog-Manjhi .

The Goret

The *Goret* is the messenger of the headman. He informs the community regarding headman's instruction or any important event in the village such as death, birth, etc. He also informs the village officials when any issue arises. He collects funds in cash or kind for specific occasions. Goret always accompanies the *Nayke* at the time of sacrifices at *Jaher thaan* and carries with him the chickens for sacrifice and the rice for preparing sacrificial meal.

The role of *Goret* and *Jog Manjhi* at Rasunchopa is played by one individual. As the village is spread over a large area and the settlements are quite far away from each other, the village is divided into four *tolas*. Two Jog Manjhis are allotted to look after four *tolas*. They are changed after the term of one year. The selection of the Jog Manjhi is done on rotational-basis in the month of *Magh* (Mid February), when *Magh Bonga* is worshipped or Baha is performed.

The Nayke

The *Nayke* is the village priest, who offers sacrifices to the Bongas at *Jaher thaan* on behalf of the whole village. He is the spiritual guide. He performs most of the rites and rituals and offers worship to Bongas. He is in touch with the most important deities of the Santal community. As such, he observes necessary taboos connected with the duties he performs. He offers sacrifices and eats the sacrificial meal prepared with the head of chicken or goats sacrificed to specific deities on scheduled occasions. The Nayke and his wife enjoys a sacred status in community.

The Nayke is chosen by the deities themselves through a possessed individual. The eldest son of the Nayke generally inherits the position although it is possible that he may be replaced by another individual chosen by the deities through possessed individual.

In Rasunchopa and adjacent Santal villages, the Nayke is accorded great honour at the time of Baha festival. He is taken in dancing procession, his feet are washed and 'water of luck' is distributed by him in every house. A number of individuals are possessed by the different deities of the Jaher grove and they dance around the Nayke who is taken in a procession.

Kudam Nayke

In Santal villages, Nayke's assistant used to be called *Kudam Nayke* who used to perform special sacrifices to the *Sima- Bonga*, (spirits of the village boundary), with his own blood. He also sacrifices a fowl to *Pargana Bonga* (Pargana means cluster of villages. Pargana Bonga is accordingly the God of entire territory). Now days this tradition is not in vogue.

Dihri

There used to be yet another priest called *Dihri* or *Deuri* selected specially at the time of annual hunt for offering sacrifices to the *bongas* of the forest for the safety and success of the hunting party. Selection and authority of *Dihri* is nowadays totally obsolete in *Santal* villages.

Ojha

Ojha is the naturopath-cum-magician, who is believed to connect all gurus and bongas to dispel the bad spirit to get rid of disease, death or distress of community. He is supposed to suggest /administer courses of magical and medicinal treatments for certain ailments and maladies. General perception is that an Ojha performs magical rites and is supposed to have knowledge about Bonga or spirit's wish / approval / disapproval. He does chanting of *mantar* and *jharni* (warding off evil spirit). His services may be called in by any individual, a family or the whole village. He may be called in to perform magical rites to protect the whole village from a general disease or disaster (*disom duk*). Ojha is paid for the services, by the respective person and group either in kind/ cash or both. With advancement in scientific knowledge and resources available, power of Ojha has been undermined within the community.

Functioning of the Village Council

The village council represents the formal or structured scheme for maintenance of law and order in village/community. As there is no religious sanction for moral behaviour among the Santals, the personal and social virtues are perpetuated and enforced among them by secular organization. In this respect, informal village organization is as important as the formal one. Informal village organization is implicit in the day-to-day interpersonal behaviour of the community through which is rich in oral history and oral strictures passed on by seniors in the village. This is beyond the formal structure of Village Council and codified rules. The significance of community life for an individual Santal lies more in the informal pattern of relationship in the village rather than the formal pattern. The latter comes into picture at crisis situations only.

Any family dispute is referred to the family head, who normally explains reasons and has the right to decide acts, punishment, dos and don'ts in the family. The family head is questionable for the conduct of any member in his house.

The incumbents of the formal village offices, namely, *Manjhi*, *Jog-manjhi*, *Paranik*, *Nayke*, *Kudam Nayke* constitute the inner circle of the village council called *More-Hor*. In practice, all the village elders (usually the head of the every family) are invited at the meetings. The punishment, which is generally a fine in cash and/or kind (rice-beer), is imposed upon the family head (not upon the person found guilty) by the Village Council. Similarly, all allocations, nominations and distributions are made house-wise irrespective of the number of households or individuals in it. A family is the smallest unit of village organization.

The headman convenes the village council on some complaint or in some cases even at his own instance. The council and the village elders meet and discuss the matter. The discussion is generally led by the influential members (wealthy and/or literate) who influence the decision making in the village council. Free discussion may take place. The inconclusive discussion may continue for some days pending the collection of evidences by *Jog-manjhi*. The persons who are subject of discussion are generally called at the meeting or are given a chance to explain their position.

Proper hearing is given to all persons. The council may depute *Jog-manjhi* and some other persons to make further enquiries in the matter and attempt reconciliation if that is possible. The fines imposed are generally complied by, though in exceptional cases some may defy and challenge the ruling of the council.

In Rasunchopa village when any fine is collected, generally on the spot or within a specified period, a part of it is distributed among the members of the village council and village elders for drinking. These days at many villages, this practice is not followed. The decisions are taken collectively by the village council and not by any particular person, not even by the headman. More vocal and assertive elders who have sufficient personal influence inside or outside the council may however carry the general opinion with them.

Village Leadership and the organisation of village life

Allocation of village offices is originally made among the group of families which originally established the village. The numerical proportion of the clan members and the personality of the individuals are the two important criteria for selection as an office bearer. The succession of the office is hereditary in male line. But in many Santal villages traditional practice of selection of the Council of village officials from various clans according to their numerical majority has undergone a sea change. Often, it is observed these days that the influential individuals and influential clans have gained more representation in the council than the numerically strong clans of the original settlers.

Almost all the important events in the life cycle of an individual, such as birth, initiations, marriage, death, divorce, serious disease, festivals, serious crimes such as adultery, murder, incest, etc., are essentially community affairs and not mere individual or family matters. Social recognition by co-operation and participation is actively sought, howsoever selectively, by every Santal on every important occasion whether it is construction of a roof of the hut or fixing the date for marriage (Kochar, 1964). It is therefore expected of village leaders to ensure that the traditional norms are observed to maintain village homogeneity.

Over the centuries, we notice a significant transformation in Santal's cultural life. This occurred with the gradual conversion of foraging and hunting community getting transformed into an agrarian community. With the advent of mining and industry, some of them adopted the vocation of mining and factory labour. The educated among them joined jobs and services. But still generally agriculture continued to be the main vocation.



The traditional occupation still prevails among a chunk of the population

Graphics (Daag Chitra)

While the above visuals reproduce the Santal village life in historical and contemporary perspectives, we have the instance of *Daag Chitra* to further depict how rural life is organised. We extensively quote from K.C.Tudu for elaboration:

For the execution of the social obligations in their daily life, Santals have divided the work among themselves according to their clans. The type of work done by each clan was traditionally added as title along with their clan name. Like: the people from Hansda clan were designated for carpentry. Hence they were titled as “Hansdah Badohi”. The people from Mardi clan were genius in farming and agriculture “Krishikarya”, hence they were titled as “Mardi Kisand”. The people from Soren clan were courageous, so they were allotted to be the soldiers, and so were titled as “Soren Sipahi”. The people of Hembram clan were educationist and so they were titled as “Hembram Purudhul” . The people of Tudu clan were artists and thus were named as Tudu Rasika. The Kisku clan people were good in administration and so were named as Kisku Rapaj. The group from Baskey clan were considered to be quite powerful and thus were named as Baskey Bayar. The dancers belonged to the Besra clan and thus they were titled as Baskey Nachoni. The people from Chodein clan were involved in social work and thus titled as Chodeinchayreth. The business man was from Pavriya clan and they were titled as Pavriya Beypariya. The people from Bediya clan were involved in superstitious works and thus titled as Bediya Ojha. The people from Murmu clan were involved in social work as well as the work of Priest and so were named as Murmu Thakur.

About the change, Tudu writes:

Presently the Santal tribe does not give much importance to clan title. But according to the clan title tattoos have been a major part of the lifestyle of the tribe. Thus traditionally and even today during festivals and different rituals, the cows & bulls are marked with various designs which are known as Jaati Daag or Gotra Daag or Gotra Pratik Chinha.

A Visual Journey into Santal Village Life

1. हॉसका गोत्र के लिए <i>For Hanska Clan</i>		कापी (कुलहाड़ी), <i>Kapi (AXE)</i>		हॉसली (हॉसली) <i>Hansli (an ornament worn on the neck)</i>
2. मारदी गोत्र के लिए <i>For Mardi Clan</i>		सार (तीर), <i>Saar (ARROW)</i>		सिमकाटा (पैर) <i>Simkaza (leg of cock/hen)</i>
3. सोरेन गोत्र के लिए <i>For Soren Clan</i>		इपिल (तारा), <i>Eepil (Star)</i>		तारा (Star)
4. हेम्ब्रम गोत्र के लिए <i>For Hembrom Clan</i>		पौवड़ा (छड़ी), (Wooden Stick)		अँकिलेसी (A bent nail or hook)
5. टुडु गोत्र के लिए <i>For Tudu Clan</i>		हया (लकड़ी), (Wooden Stick)		हया (छड़ी) (Wooden Stick)
6. किरकु गोत्र के लिए <i>For Kisku Clan</i>		आइगोम (हैंपा), (Wooden Stick)		हया (लकड़ी) (Wooden Stick)
7. बास्के गोत्र के लिए <i>For Baskey Clan</i>		नाहेल (हल), <i>Nahel (plough)</i>		पोटम (घोटला) (Bale)
8. चोई गोत्र के लिए <i>For Chorey Clan</i>		दलटम (हँसिया), (Sickle)		छादरी (सिक्की) (Ladder)
9. पावरीया गोत्र के लिए <i>For Pawriya Clan</i>		ओझा (घर), (House)		घड़ा (खिली) (POT)
10. गोंडवार गोत्र के लिए <i>For Gondwar Clan</i>		पालकी, (Palanquin)		खोंड (खोंड) (Spherical sphere shaped rice duct)
11. बेदिया गोत्र के लिए <i>For Bediya Clan</i>		हुयड, (Leaf)		साकम (पत्ती) (Leaf)
12. मुरुमु गोत्र के लिए <i>For Murmu Clan</i>		हेरा, (Hook)		हेरा (सुन कटने का समान) (Hook)
13. बेसरा गोत्र के लिए <i>For Betra Clan</i>		चाक (चटिया), (Wheel)		खड़ी (छड़ी) (Twig)

Method of DAAG

To quote Tudu again:

The whole community gathers together for the celebration of any festival or execution work. During the Saakraat Parv on a definite day the whole community of the village gathers at one place. The process of Daag is accomplished by Ojha or an elderly person from the community. At first the cow or bull is made to lie down on the ground. The mixture of cowdung and water is rubbed on its thighs after which the Ojha with a hot rod or Hasiya (sickle) puts a seam (Daag) on the thighs. Then a mixture of ointment for the pain relief is

applied on the thighs of the animals. In this way every cow and bull gets a seam on its body. The seam is different for different clans. The cow or bull without the seam is not allowed to participate in any social or ritual work, marriage etc. Seam as per clan and tribe is enclosed at the end of the document.

Conclusion

The above portrayal thus depicts the story of how Santal rural life is organised. It portrays how norms had/have been formulated and transformed. This also depicts how the historical forces influenced the community to reshape rural life considerably. Visual representation of the change particularly in the house structure signifies the historic movement of the community from nature to the culture. The type of substantial houses and the most attractive murals perhaps also evidence the emergence of the house pattern as the expression of their collective identity.

Acknowledgement

The structures depicted in the article have been taken from Gauri Bharat. 2014. *BAHA Magazine*, pp. 51–53.

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Whose *Matkam*? An Ethnographic Account of the Political Economy of Mahua Flowers

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Abstract

This study contributes to improving natural resource governance in central eastern India by identifying the factors that determine access to a non-wood forest product called the mahua (*Madhuca indica*) flower, or *matkam* in the Ho language. These flowers are an income source for forest-dependent Ho people's village households in Jharkhand state's West Singhbhum district during the farming off-season. The commodity chain involves local and regional traders, and the main commercial use is distilling liquor from mahua flowers. Since the Bihar and Orissa Excise Act of 1915, this has been banned in this region, where mahua flowers are traded without any regulatory policy, then used illegally by distillers or transported to neighbouring states. Tracing how overlapping government policies and entangled institutions undermine the Ho's access to this resource as local users and owners, the study explains how relatively privileged traders are able to maintain an extractive exploitation-based political economy. Delving into ethnographic nuances, it improves our understanding of access to mahua flowers for Jharkhand's forest-dwelling communities, being centrally concerned with how various processes and structures impact everyday access to natural resources for marginalised groups. It argues that by devolving power and resources to a formal local democratic institution, the Jharkhand government can enable communities to make collective decisions and enforce them with regard to accessing benefits from natural resources such as the mahua flower.

Introduction

Natural resource governance has long been a contentious issue in resource-rich West Singhbhum district. This central eastern Indian region was brought under British control with the formation of the Kolhan Government Estate in 1837 (Gupta 2009), became part of the Indian state of Bihar after independence in 1947, and has been part of the Indian state of Jharkhand since its formation in 2000. The long-term changes in regional administration and national policies on natural resources, coupled with political instability since Jharkhand's formation with 13 changes in government till date, have resulted in overlapping multi-level legislation and patchy implementation of natural resource governance in West Singhbhum district (Sundar 2009). Over time, some of its natural wealth has been degraded due to heavy resource exploitation in the form of logging and mining (Prakash 2011). Simultaneously, its majority population of Scheduled Tribes, comprising *adivasi* or indigenous people recognised as being ethnically distinct by the Constitution of India, has grown in absolute number (from 978,069 in 2001 to 1,011,296 in 2011 as per census figures) and continues to be largely dependent on natural resources for its survival (Corbridge *et al.* 2004). Understanding the implications of contradictory policies and inconsistent implementation for natural

resource governance is essential for insight into the lives of these vulnerable groups and the challenges they face in everyday life in West Singhbhum's forests and countryside, where most Scheduled Tribes live in rural subsistence farming and foraging communities.

Some recent work has been concerned with the political economy of Jharkhand's natural resources, some of which such as iron ore and teak wood are highly valuable and of interest to both the government and powerful regional elites (Basu 2012; Chandra 2013). A few studies have closely examined the use of natural resources by some of rural Jharkhand's tribal communities, and some have conducted detailed valuations of contributions of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) to household incomes (Mahapatra *et al.* 2005; Singh and Quli 2011). Overall, regional literature provides a fairly adequate introduction to the challenges faced by Jharkhand's rural population including several ethnic minorities who depend heavily on their natural resource base. It acknowledges that local and regional elites have benefitted from Jharkhand's natural resources at the cost of indigenous people, and that the government has allowed and even enabled this (Areeparampil 1988; Shah 2010). Yet, it falls short on the count of sufficient attention to a particular NWFP, one that is most commonly collected by almost every rural household in West Singhbhum and provides a critical additional source of household income during the farming off-season in these primarily single-crop subsistence farming communities. This NWFP is the mahua (*Madhuca indica*) flower.

Some natural resources can be used as a lens to understand various cultural norms, political processes and institutional structures (Pouliot 2012; Tsing 2011). The mahua flower is one such: it provides a way into understanding cultural norms of ownership and access within communities, the local effects of policies on natural resources, the degree of control exercised over and benefit obtained from a natural resource by different actors, and the institutional structures that enable these dynamics. I aim to present a grounded analysis of the role of mahua flowers in the lives of communities of the Ho people, a Scheduled Tribe concentrated in and around West Singhbhum district. A natural consequence of this in-depth empirical analysis is an improved understanding of Ho people's access to natural resources, of the role that other actors play in the mahua flower trade, and of the institutions involved in governing this natural resource.

My enquiry is anchored in this research question: In what ways are villagers in predominantly Ho communities of West Singhbhum able to benefit from mahua flowers (which they call *matkam*) and what factors determine this outcome? This piece is structured as follows: first, a background section presents the socio-economic and policy context within which Ho people access mahua flowers and introduces various actors and institutions; next, a framework to analyse access to benefits from mahua flowers is explained as well as the methods employed to collect data for the analysis; then, the results are presented; and finally, the broader implications for villagers to be able to exercise their formal rights through institutionalised processes and benefit from the access they are entitled to are discussed.

The socio-economic characteristics of mahua flowers and the institutional and policy context

This section draws on regional literature to detail the characteristics of the mahua flower as a natural resource, including policies pertaining to it, forms of rights over it, and the institutions that govern various actors' access to it.

A recent economic valuation study in two neighbouring forest divisions in the study district shows that 97.2 per cent of households collect this NWFP, solely for commercial purposes, and it provides an average of 1,156 rupees of annual household income during its month-long March-April period of collection (Singh and Quli 2011). This is higher than the household income contributions of any other NWFP except tamarind (1,272 rupees) and lac (7,803 rupees). But according to the study, of the NWFPs contributing to tribal livelihoods, tamarind and lac make up only 10 and three percent by volume respectively, compared to 63 percent for the mahua flower. So the mahua flower is an NWFP collected by almost every household near West Singhbhum's forests.

It makes a significant income contribution during a critical period of the year, the early summer, when single-crop farmers have few local livelihood options and depend on forest resources to supplement their stock of rice (Ramnath 2003). In Jharkhand, tribes people are allowed to trade the mahua flower, but using it to distil liquor – its main use – is *de facto* illegal. This makes mahua flower collectors price-takers to traders who transport the flowers to neighbouring states (JSLPS 2009). A study in neighbouring Chhattisgarh, where distillation is permitted, suggests that poor market access brings low returns to mahua flower collectors, identifying improved access to credit, storage and knowledge as key leverage points (Panda *et al* (undated)). It recommends that decentralised governance institutions implement these improvements, and claims that investing in the sector has better and more cost-effective potential outcomes than existing poverty alleviation schemes.

On the one hand, the Indian government has passed national legislation giving forest-dwelling tribal people property rights to such resources, with the Constitution of India mandating ownership of NWFPs by village communities under the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (GoI 1996). On the other hand, instead of operationalising this constitutional mandate in a consistent manner, the state law, namely the Jharkhand Panchayat Raj Act, 2001 (GoJ 2001) is at odds with it, permitting access in a way that favours the local and regional elite's access to benefits from this resource while marginalising primary collectors. In the rest of this section, I consider these multi-level overlapping policies related to the NWFP, the institutions relevant for its governance, and the categories of actors involved in its local supply chain.

Historically, distribution of natural resource benefits in the forest has been officially based on working plans made by the Forest Department (Corbridge and Kumar 2002). But regions such as the study district with significant tribal populations dependent on natural resources are constitutionally categorised as Scheduled Areas in India. Since 1996, the village assembly can constitutionally 'safeguard and preserve ... community resources and the customary mode of dispute resolution', and state-level legislation must respect 'customary law...and traditional management practices of community resources' in such regions (GoI 1996). The village assembly is a community level institution whose membership comprises all adults in a village, constitutionally empowered to be the basic unit of participatory democracy (GoI 1992). It is formally empowered by national policies to control and manage natural resources (land, forest, water) in accordance with traditions, and exercise ownership over NWFPs (Dandekar and Choudhury 2009).

India's federal nature, however, leaves further specification to state legislation (Gregersen *et al* 2004). The Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act 2001 (JPRA) reduces the village assembly's role in NWFPs from ownership to 'managing, collecting, storing and marketing' (GoI 2001). It enables the state government to alter the powers of the village assembly, rendering the institution much less effective than national policy mandates (ELDF 2012; Upadhyay 2004). In this morass of overlapping legislation, most forest is

administered by the Forest Department in practice, with forest-dwellers having usufruct rights, despite the latter having been constitutionally assigned comprehensive local self-governance rights. Regional literature is consistently critical of the state government's role, terming it repressive and arguing for a transfer of power from higher-level government agencies to communities in ways that incorporate traditional social structures and indigenous access to resources in local governance institutions (Sundar 2005; World Bank 2007; Prakash 2007).

Given this policy framework, the actors and institutions most likely to be involved in accessing and authorising the distribution of benefits from these resources were studied. The choice of categories was informed both inductively by detailed empirical work as well as deductively by existing literature on the region's and Ho's environmental history and natural resource governance (Verardo 2003; Yorke 1976; Mundu 2006). Their use is also based on theoretical knowledge within writings on common-pool resource management, participatory governance, and state-community relations in resource-conflict zones like the study region (Poteete and Ostrom 2004; Persha *et al* 2011; Cleaver 2002).

The focus of the empirical study, and consequently the scope of actors studied, is at the local level. The categories I use, based on the influence of actors over natural resource access, include the Forest Department, local and regional traders, 'ordinary' household members within forest villages, and the village assembly as a deliberative self-governance institution at the community level. An additional category of elected councils based on representative democracy, that form a three-tiered system of participatory governance from the district to the village-cluster level, was initially included but subsequently removed. This is because, while the lowest of these levels played a role in activities of the rural development line agency and a few others, it was not involved in access to NWFPs and other natural resources. Similarly, the traditional Ho village chieftain, or *munda*, was initially considered separately, but did not play a role in access to mahua flowers.

Analytical framework and methods

To study local-level benefits from mahua flowers to these actors, I employed an analytical framework proposed by Ribot and Peluso, which defines access as 'the ability to benefit from things' (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 153). Conducting access analysis using this framework shows what mechanisms enable actors to benefit. According to the framework, these mechanisms are either rights-based, or structural and relational. Rights-based mechanisms include institutions, *i.e.*, formal and informal sets of rules relating to resource access, by way of legal rules, cultural and social norms, and values. Structural and relational mechanisms include access to technology, capital, social relations, markets for labour and labour opportunities, authority, knowledge, social identity, and the negotiation of other social relations. Actors access resources using an assortment of these mechanisms. Identifying both kinds of mechanisms used to access mahua flowers, I mapped local-level benefit flows from them to various actors.

In order to study how these access mechanisms are employed by actors and authorised by institutions, an empirical study was conducted across 20 forest and forest-fringe villages in Khuntpani block of West Singhbhum district over six months, in four phases over two years till January 2015. These villages were all Ho-dominated, with largely homogenous indigenous communities in which any non-Ho households had been included over generations. They were located 10-30 km southwest of the district

headquarter town of Chaibasa, with the forested villages part of Sadar Chaibasa forest division. The study included over 100 semi-structured interviews with villagers (usually with an interpreter translating Hindi-Ho-Hindi) about access to forest resources, using an interview guide based on the access analytical framework. Dozens of key informant interviews were conducted with village chiefs, local councillors, officials from the Forest Department, local and regional NWFP traders, local researchers, NGO staff and social activists. Participation in *haats* or weekly village markets and many informal chats also contributed to the field research. This was complemented by examining academic and grey literature on natural resource governance in Jharkhand.

Results from the access analysis of mahua flowers

The benefits from mahua flowers were found to be distributed highly inequitably at the local level. The results are organised by reporting the access analysis findings for mahua flowers sequentially in terms of the different mechanisms that determined actors' access.

Rights-based mechanisms determined access to mahua trees. Individual households owned trees standing on their land. Mahua trees on communally-owned village land belonged to the individual who had planted them according to community norms, and their household had the right to collect its flowers. Mahua trees in Forest Department-administered forest further away were open-access, since all villagers had usufruct rights to their mahua flowers. Households with rights to many trees sometimes permitted relatives from other villages to collect mahua flowers from trees they owned, which is a form of access through social relations. While almost every village household collected mahua flowers during the March-April season, it was mostly women and children who were involved in the collection. In these subsistence-farming, forest-dependent Ho communities, this was a useful way to make off-season household income.

Collecting mahua flowers required little by way of harvesting technologies. It was common for villagers to set fire to the ground below the tree to clear it of dried leaves and twigs, making it easier to collect the little mahua flowers. These were subsequently sundried in household yards for a few days, cordoned off from goats and cattle with stick-and-twine fences. Access to benefit from distilling liquor using these mahua flowers was, however, illegal according to the Jharkhand government, which denied communities the right to decide through their village assembly. Therefore, they were sold by the primary collectors to local traders at weekly markets in nearby villages, or directly to one of a handful of regional traders in Chaibasa who transported them further. The local traders collected on behalf of these regional traders as well, taking a small commission by offering slightly lower prices in village markets and saving villagers a 20-30 km bicycle ride to Chaibasa. Thus, local traders used their access to capital and transport in the form of a motored vehicle to benefit from the mahua flower.

According to key informant interviews at village markets, the price fluctuated between 15-25 rupees per kg during the month-long season, hovering between 15 and 20 rupees most of the time. The local traders set and adjusted the going rate in an oligopsony-like buyer's market. They also defined rates by providing volume-based improvised measuring bowls – a small or big bowlful of dried mahua flowers for 5 or 10 rupees. These 'standard' volumes supposedly corresponded with quarter and half kg weights respectively. Field observation showed that villagers unfailingly piled the bowls till overflowing, reducing their own income. Thus local traders also benefitted using

access to knowledge and through their social identity as the more powerful party in the trade.

Some villagers preferred pooling their collections and going directly to a trader in Chaibasa, thereby cutting out the local traders' trading margin. Traders in Chaibasa, always male, paid for mahua flowers already packed in sacks and their transport. These services estimatedly cost them a negligible 1 rupee per 3 kg (JSLPS 2009). Payment there was by the sack, typically weighing 40-50 kg on an electronic scale. For villagers, this involved the extra expense of either effort for lugging a cycle load, or money if a cart or motored vehicle was hired for many sacks. With sufficient quantities to harness economies of scale, traders used access to capital to hire local truck drivers and deliver the dried mahua flowers to state capital Ranchi for shipment to neighbouring states with the requisite permits. They used access to social relations to make verbal telephonic agreements with contacts, based on access to knowledge of the current market rate. Key informant interviews with traders clarified that they were backed up with the confidence that they could threaten with brute force and dire consequences if the buyer tried to renege on the agreement later, and would use this access to social identity if, for instance, the buyer claimed prices had fallen during transport.

Thus, thanks to access to market, capital, technologies of transport, social identity and social relations, elites (local and regional traders) were able to access benefits from the mahua flower. This was enabled by the rights-based mechanism that made it illegal for mahua flowers to be used to distil liquor locally. While calculating exact profit margins for the trader proved difficult due to lack of reliable data, a rough estimate is that the distilled and diluted liquor sold for three times the price paid for the requisite volume of mahua flowers, when sold by small-scale bootleggers. A few of these conducted sporadic low-key operations in the study villages, especially during traditional Ho festivals, using wood as fuel during the distillation process. It is likely that traders, illicit or licensed distilleries in the state capital Ranchi, and distilleries in the neighbouring state of Chhattisgarh where operations are legal, could sell liquor at a higher price and harness economies of scale. This is confirmed by the fact that mahua flowers sold for much higher prices in the off-season, with interviewees mentioning more than twice the seasonal rate. This led the few villagers who could afford to put off earnings, due to access to capital, to hoard mahua flowers till after the monsoon season and sell around October. For ordinary village households, however, income from mahua flowers was crucial during the farming off-season. They sold at the going rate they could get at the market.

Discussion and conclusion: Inequitable access to mahua flowers

I found that benefits from mahua flowers accrued primarily to elites in the form of local and regional traders, and ostensibly to distilleries further away, despite villagers having both formal and *de facto* rights to this NWFP. This was mainly due to the government's decision to outlaw distilling liquor from mahua flowers locally, their main commercial use. Hos lacked access to capital, transport, knowledge of pricing and permits, and social identity as traders, which were essential structural and relational mechanisms that regional traders used to access benefits from mahua flowers while buying and transporting them.

It is hard to change such deeply-embedded social inequality between elite traders and forest-dwelling villagers quickly (Arauco *et al.* 2014). It is also impossible to change some aspects of it without implying that the Ho should change their way of life and

accustom themselves to mainstream society. For instance, one could argue that Ho people need improved bargaining power and a better understanding of market prices and trade through education and more income-based livelihoods. However, the Constitution of India upholds the rights of tribal communities to maintain traditional ways (GoI 1996). It also safeguards their access to natural resources they are dependent on, and makes it imperative upon state governments to provide such access substantively. Building on the findings above, I argue that for the Jharkhand government to do so requires two kinds of action.

The first is to devolve power to a local democratic institution, the village assembly, through which village communities have the constitutional mandate to govern natural resources. For mahua flowers, an empowered village assembly would constitute the basis for villagers to engage in collective transport and bargaining. This governance-related argument advocates measures for the empowerment of village communities in accordance with formal mandates. Process is key here, meaning that villagers would have the ability to themselves decide and implement how their natural resources are accessed. Should their village assemblies decide against distilling liquor from mahua flowers, for instance to avoid social harm arising from potential drunkenness and addiction, the Ho should still be able to use these institutions to deliberate over and decide how they want to benefit from their rights over the mahua flower.

However, advocacy of democratic decentralisation often suffers from a pro-community bias (Corbridge and Jewitt 1997). In this case, the scenario is rife with potential problems. Village assemblies could function in internally inequitable ways, with members within village communities co-opting power at the cost of other villagers. Moreover, local elites who currently benefit could collude to outwit such newly-empowered village assemblies (Sundar 2001). Even if the latter were able to employ rights-based mechanisms unlike at present, the local elites would be able to claim access through superior structural and relational mechanisms. They could, for instance, play different village assemblies off against each other, or use their experience with the NWFP market to freeze out these new actors.

Consequently, an economics-related argument is also in order. As a formal local democratic institution, the village assembly requires strong government support from above, including in the form of resources (Manor 2011). It requires access to technologies of transport, information on market rates and access to cheap or free credit to establish initial capital in order to complement its authority to govern its natural resources. This will allow it to function as an actor on the market, enabling villagers to access benefits from their NWFPs in a more equitable manner than at present. Outcome is key here, meaning that villagers would in fact be able to access benefits from NWFPs that they have formal rights to, such as the mahua flower.

At present the most common tendency is for villagers who can access certain benefits to maximise their self-interest even at the cost of other villagers, much like local elites do—for instance by using any capital to hoard mahua flowers at low prices during the collecting season and then selling it at higher prices to traders in October. Deliberative, empowered decision-making, with access to requisite resources, can enable proactive mobilisation by villagers and enforce virtuous trends while safeguarding against co-option within communities.

Thus, the government must institutionalise authorisation through the village assembly by devolving power and resources to it with support from above. Empowering this institution will enable collective decision-making by actors with formal rights to natural

resources. Devolving resources to the institution will enable them to implement their decisions and convert formal rights into access, thereby benefitting from these natural resources. In short, institutionalising authorisation through an empowered village assembly will bring rights and access in closer alignment, legitimising power by vesting it in a formal deliberative institution with authority to govern natural resources, and leading to more equitable access.

This local study of mahua flowers sought to understand marginalised groups' access to an NWFP under the current configuration of natural resource governance policies and institutions. Applying an access framework, I demonstrated how different actors employ rights-based as well as structural and relational mechanisms to access benefits, which are inequitably distributed across actors. Based on the findings, I argued that by devolving power and resources to a formal local democratic institution, the Jharkhand government can enable communities to make collective decisions and enforce them with regard to accessing benefits from natural resources such as the mahua flower. This argument has both a governance-related aspect of villagers being able to exercise their formal rights through institutionalised processes, and an economics-related aspect of actors benefitting from the access to the NWFP they are entitled to.

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A Note on ‘Some Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Religious Opinions of the Lurka Coles’ by William Dunbar

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The above article of Dr. William Dunbar, running into eight pages, was first published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* in January 1861. Colonial ethnographical studies in India until independence were mainly confined to the study of tribes/Adivasis/indigenous people. These included ethnographic notes, monographs, gazetteers, and administrative, census, and other informative reports which were primarily meant to produce knowledge about these people so as to facilitate colonial governance. The focus of the studies was to collect information about tradition, customs and beliefs, social organisation, ceremonies and festivals of different tribes. Early colonial ethnographers thus provided solid empirical data, unlike early Orientalists, who based their studies on ancient Hindu texts.

Early documentation of one of the principal tribal groups, the Ho, more famous as *Larka Kole* began in a fragmentary form in the correspondence of E. Roughsedge, the Military General, who led British army against the Larka Kole in 1819-20. This was, however, elaborated and systematised by Lt. S.R. Tickell, the first Assistant Political Agent of the Kolhan Government Estate in the district of Singhbhum in Bihar, in his *Memoir on Hodesum (improperly called Kolehan)*, which was published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1840. Tickell’s account still remains an unmatched source material about the Ho during early colonial period.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, ethnological studies came to the forefront, spearheaded by E.T. Dalton and H.H. Risley. Indigenes of Bihar, rather the present-day Jharkhand, became an important subject matter of study for these colonial-day ethnographers and ethnologists.

The present work of Dr. William Dunbar comes within the former category. This was contemporary to the more famous Dalton’s ‘The “Kols” of Chota-Nagpore’, which

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Lurka Coles' by William Dunbar

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Colonial scholar-administrators have generally observed that tribal way of life was unchanging. This they assigned to their self-imposed isolation, inhabiting a terrain which was largely inaccessible to an invading army. Although Dunbar had praised the Adivasis on several occasions, his ethnographic writing seems to have pushed down Hos of Singhbhum to the bottom of the civilization ladder. So in his eyes the Kols were wild and ferocious, predatory and barbarous; they were feared by all in the vicinity because of their recurring and daring inroads (Dunbar 1861: 375). Civilisation was equated with settled agriculture, and dependence on forests for a livelihood was interpreted as primitiveness. To emphasise the Hos as a pre-peasant community, Dunbar wrote 'Scarcely anything but dhan is raised, and the fields in which it is sown are so small, ill formed, and to all appearances so badly attended to, that abundant crops are, I suspect, of rare occurrence. Immense tracts of the fine land have been for ages covered with the old forest trees or with dense and shrubby jungle, and no attempt seems to have been made at any time to clear the soil, the coles contending themselves with the few open patches which are found near the villages' (Dunbar 1861: 372).

Unlike Tickell, Dunbar steps beyond Kolhan when he brings in the neighbouring princely estates of Seraikela and Kharsawan in his writing. However, this he does to substantiate the essential primitiveness of the Hos. Unlike Seraikela and Kharsawan estates, Kolhan in the mid-nineteenth century did not practise extensive cultivation and most of it appeared to him to be a barren rocky waste, or a bushy jungle (Dunbar 1861: 376). The people too differed in the two districts: the inhabitants of Kolhan were a 'race of savages' with a 'wild peculiar appearance' and having 'scanty clothing, strange manners, and more strange language' (Dunbar 1861: 376). Obviously, like his contemporaries, Dunbar was an advocate of British civilising mission. Therefore, he hoped that with British rule, and the spread of western civilisation, the Kols would adopt better agrarian technique and prosper materially.

Despite its limitations, like Tickell's 'Memoir' and Dalton's 'The Kols', the present study is a valuable source for the social science researchers, because it sheds ample light on the society, customs and manners of the Hos of Singhbhum in the 1860s, besides informing us about what the colonial scholars thought about them.

ART. VIII.—*Some Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Religious Opinions of the Lurka Coles.* By the late Dr. WILLIAM DUNBAR, H.E.I.C.S.

[Read 19th January, 1861.]

THE Coles inhabit a great extent of country. In former times they possessed the whole of Chota-Nagpore, which may now be said to be divided between them and the Dhangars or Ouraons, who came from Rotasghur. The chief men in most of the villages are still however of the old Moonda or Cole tribe, and they do not intermarry with the Dhangars. The greater part of Singhboom is inhabited by Coles, and we find them numerous in Bamanghotty, and dispersed to the vicinities of Cuttack and Midnapore. The Lurka Coles, as they are termed, inhabit those extensive tracts as yet but little known, which go under the name of the Colekans. Part of these wilds is situated in the Singhboom district, and the inhabitants pay a nominal obedience to the Maharajah of that province, but the greater proportion of this population is more under the influence of the Rajah of Mokurburj than of any of the other powerful chiefs in that part of the country. But even his orders are obeyed only where they are supposed to tend to the advantage of the Coles themselves. Upon the whole it may be said of this singular people that, living in a primeval and patriarchal manuer under their Moondas and Mankies, they have managed to preserve a sort of savage independence, making themselves dreaded and feared by their more powerful and civilized neighbours. They have always been ready to fly to arms at the call of any enterprising and desperate adventurer. It is well known that the famous rebel Gunganaram, when his own forces were broken and destroyed by the troops of Government, found refuge among the Lurka Coles, and prevailed upon them to espouse his quarrel. Had he not been cut off in his first action with the Thakoor of Kirsawa, there is no saying how long he might have defied our arms in the wilds and jungles of Colekan. The Colekan is divided into different peers, as they are

termed, or pergunnahs. These peers are, generally speaking, not of any great extent, two or three moderate marches carry you through each of them. There can be little doubt, and such I believe is the tradition among the people themselves, that the Lurka Coles came originally from Chota-Nagpore, and are descendants of the old Moondas or Moondarees of that district. Finding the romantic hills and vallies of Chota-Nagpore too confined for their increasing numbers, and stimulated, perhaps, by the desire of plunder, or by that wandering propensity characteristic of many savage nations, they emigrated long ago, and now form a distinct and powerful tribe, living in a barbarous condition in a country still more rude and mountainous than that which their forefathers abandoned. The same cast of countenance prevails in the two races, though, perhaps, tinged with a wilder and more fierce expression in the Lurkas. The Ouraons, who inhabit great part of Chota-Nagpore, regard these Coles as a tribe inferior to themselves, and do not intermarry with them. The villages in the Colekan are ruled by Moondas and Mankies, as in Chota-Nagpore. The former, the Moonda, is the proprietor of one village; while the latter holds six, eight, or twelve. These village potentates used frequently to wage fierce war with one another, and bitter and long existing feuds have often prevailed amongst them. There is this peculiarity in the Cole character, however, that serious and bloody as may be the domestic quarrels, no sooner are they threatened with hostilities from without, than all their animosities are laid aside and forgotten for a time, and they join unanimously to repel the expected danger. It appears to have been their constant aim to keep themselves as distinct from other tribes as possible, and, with the exception of a few low caste Hindoos, such as those inhabiting Jugernathpore, these districts are possessed by Coles alone. The population appears to be rather numerous, though some parts of the district are by no means so densely inhabited as others. Where we fall in with a large river or a full running stream, there the villages are thickly clustered together. In many places water is exceedingly scarce. The Coles have not yet learned the simple art of digging tanks, or rather perhaps they are too indolent and lazy to set about doing so. The very few diminutive tanks seen were in the vicinity of villages partly inhabited by Hindoos, and these contained a miserable supply of foul and ill-tasted water.

The villages are generally built on some elevated spot surrounded by trees, and, at some little distance from the principal entrance to the villages, the Cole standard or ensign, a pair of buffalo horns, is suspended in a conspicuous situation. The mode of building is some-

what different from that commonly practised in Chota-Nagpore, where the huts are built of mud. Here the people build after the fashion called "wattle and dab," using at the same time a number of strong timbers in the erection of each individual hut. In this way the new lines at Chaibassa are built, and they appear to be strong, and likely to stand for many years. The method in which the Coles lay on the chopper of a hut is also ingenious and neat. I may add that these men are by no means inexpert carpenters, after their own fashion, using the small adze, almost the only instrument they employ with no little skill and dexterity.

Cultivation and agriculture appear to be at the lowest ebb in the Colekan. Scarcely anything but *dhan* is raised, and the fields in which it is sown are so small, ill-formed, and to all appearance so badly attended to, that abundant crops are, I suspect, of rare occurrence. Immense tracts of fine land have been for ages covered with the old forest trees or with dense and shrubby jungle, and no attempts seem to have been made at any time to clear the soil, the Coles contenting themselves with the few open patches which are found near their villages. I was particularly struck, when marching through some of the peers, with seeing extensive pieces of ground consisting of that rich black soil which is said to be so favourable for the cultivation of cotton (*kootn*). In these places the junglo was always more than usually luxuriant. Some few of the inhabitants cultivate an inferior kind of cotton plant, and a few weavers prepare the scanty clothing worn by either sex. In some Cole villages a little sugar-cane is grown, and some tobacco (*jookool*), an article highly prized, in the shape of raw green cheroots. In years of want and famine it was the custom with this wild and savage people, when their own scanty resources and supplies were exhausted, to proceed in armed bands and carry off plunder from the territories of their neighbours, not unfrequently committing many atrocities in their progress.

In regard to *dress*, that of both sexes is alike, a strip of cloth brought round the loins and passed between the thighs forming their only covering. The women wear a profusion of coloured beads suspended from their necks, and have their ears pierced with a number of small brass rings. Their diet is of a very promiscuous nature; everything almost that can be considered eatable being relished by them, and much of what we consider carrion being eagerly sort for and devoured. In this respect they do not differ from the Coles of Chota-Nagpore. They are greatly addicted to drunkenness; all, from the Mankie to the poorest villager, drink their intoxicating liquids on every occasion, and it is no uncommon thing to see a whole

village in a state of brutal intoxication. It has frequently been remarked with wonder what an enormous quantity of ardent spirits a Cole can drink without apparently being in the least affected. The Coles have not the slightest idea of the use of money, all their simple transactions being carried on upon the principle of barter. Thus, if a man should wish to purchase a cow, he offers so many goats or so much rice in exchange. In preparing a temporary hut at Chaibassa, in Goomla Peer, I was compelled, on the refusal of the labourers to accept pice or rupees, to pay them in rice, an article which at that time could not be very well afforded. These men showed no small degree of acuteness in making their bargains, and always took care to see that their daily allowance was fairly supplied to them. Almost the only sort of property which the Coles can be said to possess consists in their large herds of cattle and buffaloes, which are sent to graze in the jungles. The breed of horned cattle is the same as that met with in Chota-Nagpore. The malady, called by them "rògh," which proves so fatal in the latter province, extends its ravages among the cattle here also ; and I am informed that a few years back great numbers were swept away by the pestilential scourge. Pigs, goats, and a few sheep constitute the remainder of the domestic animals usually found in the villages. Of wild animals, we find the tiger, leopard, hyena, and wild buffalo, infecting the jungles. Bears are met with in many of the hilly places, and the mountain ranges are traversed by that noble animal the gour. The deeper rivers are haunted by alligators of considerable size.

The religion of the Lurka Coles is nothing but a superstition of the grossest kind. Their great divinity is the sun (suruj), next to the sun ranks the moon (chandoo), and then the stars, which they believe to be the children of the latter. They uniformly upon solemn and great occasions invoke the sun, and by him many of these lawless men have, at times, sworn allegiance to the Honourable Company. Another form of oath used by them is that of swearing upon a small quantity of rice, a tiger's skin and claws, and the earth of the white ants' nests ; implying, that should they violate the engagement they are about to enter upon, they deserve to have their crops and fruits destroyed, and to be themselves delivered up to the most ferocious of the jungle monsters. Besides the sun and moon, other inferior divinities are supposed to exist, to whom the Coles offer up sacrifices of various kinds. These spirits are supposed to inhabit the trees and topes in and around the village. We could never ascertain distinctly what degree of power was attributed to these Penates, as we may call them ; but the belief the Coles entertain of the power and influence

of the Bhongas must be considerable, as they will on no account allow those trees to be denuded of their branches, and still less cut down. My own coolies, natives of Chota-Nagpore, were driven from a tope where they had begun to fell wood for my own use, by a party of exasperated villagers, who alleged that the Bhongas, expelled from their habitation, would infallibly wreak their vengeance upon the villagers themselves. The Lurka Coles believe strongly in witchcraft ; and this belief, so common among all savage nations, often leads them to the commission of the most dreadful crimes. The customs of the Coles regarding the inheritance of property is singular, and was first explained to me in the case of a Mankie, as he is termed, whose villages are contiguous to the cantonments of Chaibassa. Although he ruled over a considerable number of these, and was reckoned a powerful man among his class, I was surprised to find that his house was a small and poor one, and that his younger brother resided in the largest building in the place, which had formerly belonged to the deceased Mankie, his father. On enquiry, I found that on the death of the parent, the youngest son uniformly receives the largest share of the property strictly personal ; and hence the Mankie, though he succeeded to his father's authority and station as a patriarchal ruler, was obliged to resign all the goods and chattels to his younger brother. The Coles now show no unwillingness in times of sickness to put themselves in the hands of European medical men, and they take freely whatever medicines may be administered to them. The confidence indeed which this poor and barbarous race repose in British faith and skill, is only equalled by their dread of our power and greatness. In time of sickness they have recourse to prayers and sacrifices, and they place more confidence in the latter than in any of the few and simple drugs with which they are acquainted. In proportion to the severity of the disease, or the aggravation of the symptoms, are the extent and costliness of the sacrifices. Thus, in case of trifling ailments, fowls are sacrificed ; in cases of pestilence or severe fevers, bullocks and buffaloes.

It is the universal custom in the various villages, that when a woman is seized with the pains of labour, she is immediately removed to a lonely hut, the door is shut upon her, offerings of various kinds are suspended near it to propitiate the Bhongas, and no one ventures near till all is over. The female sex, it may be observed, is not kept secluded and shut up, as is the case with the Hindoos and Mussulmans ; they mingle freely with the men, and even join them in council. The Coles are said to behave in a very kind and affectionate manner to their wives and female children.

Not amongst the least singular of the customs of the Coles is that connected with their marriage. When a youth has fixed his affections on a female, generally the inhabitant of some neighbouring village, she is waylaid and carried off to his house by himself and his friends. So soon as information of this reaches the parents of the girl, they proceed to the village of the ravisher, not, however, in general, with any hostile purpose. Interviews take place between the friends on either side, and at length matters are brought to a final settlement; the new husband paying to the father of his spouse a certain number of cows, goats, or buffaloes, according to his means, or the beauty and comeliness of his bride. After this a scene of feasting and intoxication generally follows, in which women and children as well as men participate.

The Coles burn their dead, carefully collecting the bones and ashes, and burying them with offerings of rice in or near their villages, placing perpendicular or horizontal slabs of stone over each particular grave. These grave-stones form a remarkable object, and strike the eye of every stranger on approaching a Cole village. The only weapons used by the Coles, whether in war or hunting, are the bow and arrow, and the *tulwa*, or axe. From their earliest years boys are taught the use of the former; and of the strength and skill with which they shoot I have heard many remarkable instances.

The language of the Coles of this part of the country differs a good deal from that spoken by the men of Chota-Nagpore. It is needless to remark, that it is totally distinct from any other tongue spoken by the different tribes of India. It is not a written language; not a single letter of it is known. In fact, even the traditions of this singular and aboriginal race are most vague and uncertain. They have lived from time immemorial almost totally secluded from all intercourse with their civilized neighbours, allowing no stranger to occupy their soil, and only known to the tribes in their vicinity by their repeated and daring inroads, and their savage and ferocious character. The most powerful of the various chiefs, whose territories they have at different times plundered, have never had courage to pursue the Coles to their fastnesses, but have uniformly acted on the defensive; and though in the last expedition against them no active opposition was met with, it is well known that, in former years, they have shown considerable resistance to the troops of Government. It is to be hoped that a better state of things has now been established, that the Coles will gradually be weaned from their savage and predatory pursuits, and that the blessings of civilization will make sure progress among them.

The country around Kirsawa and Seraikela, belonging to the Thakoor of these places, is, on the whole, well cultivated, and tolerably productive. Advancing from Kirsawa, you cross the Sunjai river, always a beautiful stream, and here is the boundary of the Thakoor's territory. Beyond is the Colekan. The change in the appearance of the land is now very striking: scanty patches of cultivation here and there meet the eye—all else is a barren rocky waste, or a bushy jungle. The people have a wild peculiar appearance, which it is not very easy to describe. Their scanty clothing, strange manners, and more strange language, soon convince you that you are among a race of savages.

Much the same sort of country prevails until you reach Chaibassa, in Goomla Peer, where a cantonment has recently been established. Three or four marches take you to Burrunda Peer, to the south, the most restless and disturbed part of the Colekan, and, it may be added, perhaps the most inaccessible. The jungle here is very dense, and consists of both tree and bush jungle. Some parts of the Peer are hilly, but the soil, generally speaking, though sometimes stony, is rich and good; it is a deep jet black. The vegetable debris appears to have mixed well with the original mould; and the wild luxuriance of the jungle sufficiently proves, that were it once cleared away, the soil could soon, and with little trouble, be adapted for many agricultural purposes. Judging of the Colekan from those parts of it traversed by the troops on the march, we should call it a hilly country. Several extensive hilly ranges were met with, many not laid down in the maps, and those which had a place in them inaccurately described. These chains ran in various directions, were of different forms, though most of them assumed what by geologists is called the "round-backed formation," and appeared to be composed of a variety of rocks. One remarkable chain is the Singh-ásan, about 800 feet high, bold, steep, and nearly precipitous on one side, gently sloping and covered with jungle on the other. A rough examination of the Ghaut, where we crossed this range, showed it to be composed mostly of a coarse conglomerate, containing much quartz; a second and smaller chain of hills behind the Singh-ásan, and near the village of Pungwa, consisted chiefly of rock slate. The Burkola hills, distant six miles from Chaibassa, stretching at first pretty nearly north and south, and then, under the denomination of the Ragree hills, trending away to south-west, are already famous for the dreadful storms which come sweeping over their summits. They are about 700 feet above the plain, and are cleft in many places into picturesque hollows and ravines. One detached portion of this chain which I visited was mostly composed

of masses of hard greenstone, having a conchoidal fracture, and frequently giving a metallic ring when struck by the hammer.

Besides these, and other mountain chains, there are, as in Chota-Nagpore, numerous smaller isolated hills, scattered as it were over the face of the country. Quartz abounds everywhere, sometimes lamellar, sometimes crystallized, sometimes having numerous hollows and veins filled with ochrous earth, iron ore, and occasionally copper pyrites. Lime is found near Chaibassa and elsewhere. Iron in the kankar shape, and in a much purer form, abounds; indeed, a great proportion of the rocks in many tracts in the Colekan seem to be highly ferruginous. It is reported, and I believe correctly, that some of the precious metals, and more rare minerals, are to be found in some parts of the Colekan. There can be little doubt that the geologist would find an ample field for study and observation in these unexplored regions. Passing through the country rapidly as I did, at a time when it was unsafe to wander to any distance from camp, all I could do was, to collect specimens of the different rocks composing some of the hilly chains and beds of nullahs, most of which, I regret to say, were lost on the road to Dorinda.