

**Understanding the State:  
An Anthropological Study of Rural Jharkhand, India**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores understandings of the state in rural Jharkhand, Eastern India. It asks how and why certain groups exert their influence within the modern state in India, and why others do not. To do so the thesis addresses the interrelated issues of ex-*zamindar* and ex-tenant relations, development, corruption, democracy, tribal movements, seasonal casual labour migration, extreme left wing militant movements and moral attitudes towards drink and sex. This thesis is informed by twenty-one months of fieldwork in Ranchi District of which, for eighteen months, a village in Bero Block was the research base.

The thesis argues that at the local level in Jharkhand there are at least two main groups of people who hold different, though related, understandings of the state. There is a local elite, usually descendants of the old *zamindars*, who both understands state ideas and interacts in its local processes. Understanding state ideas is, however, different to an internalisation of, or a commitment to, them. Indeed, the thesis argues that local elite interaction with the state is ultimately guided by their seeing state resources as for their own vested interests. A contrasting understanding of the state is held, however, by the second main group, the poorer tribal peasantry, who are usually descendants of the tenants of the old *zamindars*. They see the state as a new, outside and foreign agency that is not legitimated in the world of their spirits. As such, they see the state as dangerous and exploitative and seek to minimise interaction with it.

The thesis suggests that there is a political economy through which the tribal peasant idea of the state, as distinct from and separate to tribal society, is reproduced. It is suggested that, due to their desires to limit the number of people interacting with the state, the local elite enhances the reproduction of the tribal peasant view. Furthermore, the thesis suggests that even alternative state visions, which appear to be concerned about the welfare of the 'exploited' and 'suppressed' tribals of Jharkhand, such as that of the new tribal state movement or that of the extreme left-wing Maoist Communist Centre, only serve to further marginalize and suppress those they allegedly serve.



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## Glossary of Organisations and Acronyms

AJSU	All Jharkhand Students Union
BDO	Block Development Officer
BJP	<i>Bharatya Janata Party</i>
Block Office	Block Development Office
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CF	Conservator of Forests
CPI(M)	Community Party of India (Marxist)
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
DFO	District Forest Officer
DWCRA	Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas
EIRFP	Eastern India Rain-fed Farming Project
GEL	German Evangelical Lutheran Church
IAS	<i>Indira Awas Scheme</i>
JMM	<i>Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Jharkhand Liberation Front</i>
JP	Jharkhand Party
LEO	Ladies Extension Officer
MCC	Maoist Communist Centre
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
OBC	Other Backward Caste
POTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
POTO	Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance
PRI	<i>Panchayati Raj</i> Institutions
PWG	People's War Group
PU	Party Unity
RJD	<i>Rashtriya Janata Dal</i>
RMCH	Ranchi Medical College Hospital
RSS	<i>Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh</i>

SC	Scheduled Caste
SRC	States Reorganisation Commission
ST	Scheduled Tribe



## Glossary of Selected Hindi and Nagpuria Terms

Throughout the text I have tried to use the English translation as opposed to the Nagpuria or Hindi terms wherever possible. Where an English equivalent could not satisfactorily be found to convey the local term, I have transliterated the spoken Hindi and Nagpuria into Roman script. I have tried to provide the simplest form in the text. I have thus left out diacritical versions and have given priority to the way words sound rather than to the conventions of Sanskrit orthography. The glossary below is intended as an aid to the reader and includes only those words that appear several times in the text.

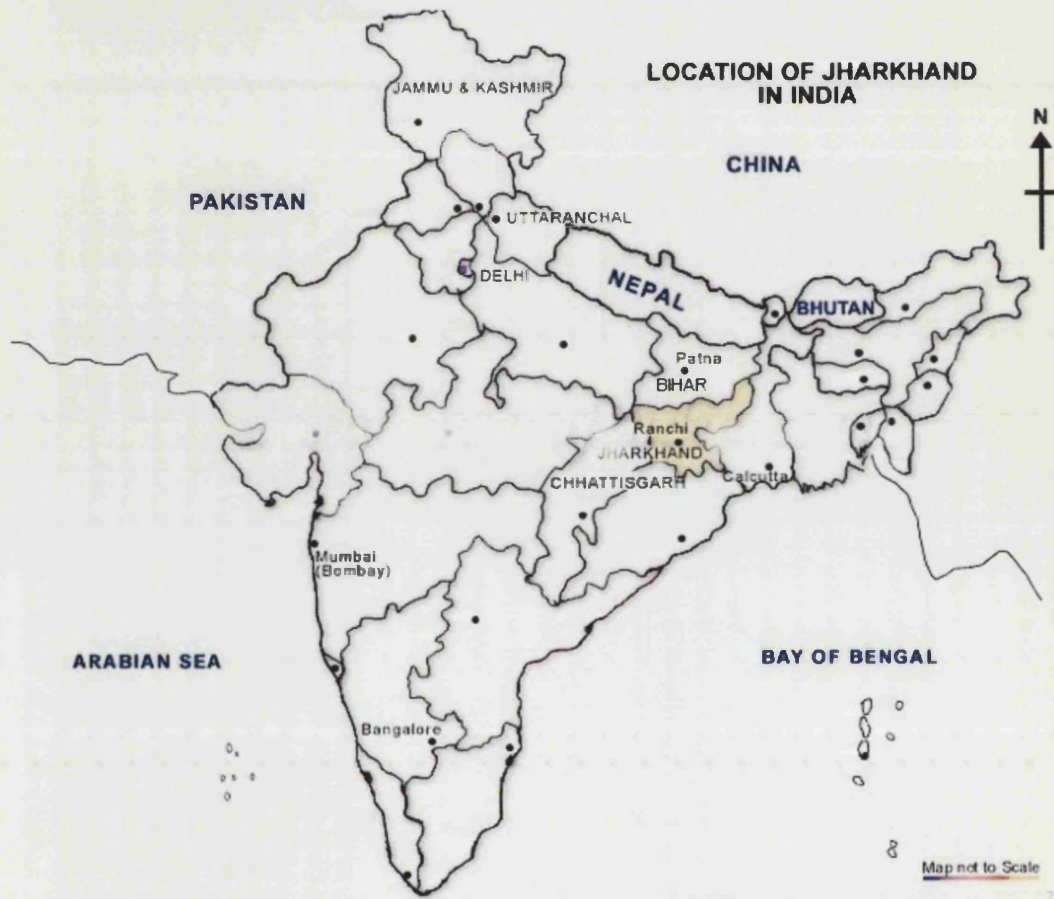
<i>adivasi</i>	literally meaning aboriginal or first settler. Now a common term for 'tribal'.
<i>akhra</i>	village dancing circle
<i>angandbadi</i>	preschool
<i>angrez</i>	English
<i>arwa rice</i>	rice which is husked when raw (ie not boiled before husking).
<i>bada</i>	big, important
<i>banda</i>	pig
<i>bandh</i>	road blockade
<i>bari</i>	upland to build houses and have small vegetable gardens
<i>bhagat</i>	man who has the capacity to be a spirit medium.
<i>bhaktein</i>	woman who has the capacity to be a spirit medium.
<i>bhat</i>	cooked rice
<i>bhatu</i>	brother-in-law
<i>bhutkhetta land</i>	land set aside for the spirits. The men who receive this land are the <i>bhutkhetta</i> beneficiaries.
<i>bhuinhar</i>	Oraon term for first settler
<i>chai</i>	tea

<i>chanda</i>	donations
<i>charpoy</i>	a bed made of a bamboo frame across which jute rope is stretched in a criss-cross net
<i>dal</i>	lentils
<i>dan</i>	unreciprocated gift
<i>dhan</i>	husked rice
<i>dhangar</i>	servant who lives in the house of his mater and does any work requested in return for a bed, food, clothes and sometimes a small sum of money.
<i>dhoti</i>	loin cloth
<i>dhuku-dhara</i>	cases of illicit love affairs
<i>dhumkuria</i>	village dormitory (called <i>ghotul</i> in other areas)
<i>diku</i>	outsider
<i>do number kam</i>	literally meaning 'second number work' but indicating illegal dealings
<i>doin</i>	lowland
<i>English</i>	generic local term for Indian beers, whisky, rum and gin
<i>ghairmazrua</i>	land without occupancy rights
<i>garib</i>	poor
<i>gau ka kam</i>	village work
<i>ghotul</i>	village dormitory
<i>ghus</i>	bribe
<i>hadia</i>	beer brewed from rice
<i>hotel</i>	usually a tea-shop which also sells fried food or a restaurant.
<i>jati</i>	sub-caste
<i>jatra</i>	festival
<i>jola</i>	cloth bag
<i>jungli</i>	literally meaning 'off the jungle' but implying savage, wild, dirty, backward
<i>khalihan</i>	flat areas cleared to pound husked rice from the stalk

<i>khatiyān</i>	official colonial village land record
<i>kharif</i>	monsoon season
<i>khuntkhattidar</i>	munda term for first settler
<i>kurta</i>	long sleeved baggy shirt with no collar
<i>lakh</i>	one <i>lakh</i> is one hundred thousand
<i>line hotel</i>	a restaurant and sometimes rest house, on the edge of, or lining, a major road.
<i>lunghis</i>	wrap around loin cloth
<i>mahua</i>	<i>madhuca indica</i>
<i>mahua pani</i>	a liquor distilled from the <i>mahua</i> flower
<i>mandap</i>	stage
<i>mashal</i>	torch made of kerosene-dipped cloth tied to the edge of a pole
<i>mela</i>	festival
<i>munshi</i>	clerk
<i>oriya</i>	40 kilogram is equal to one <i>oriya</i> .
<i>paenbharra</i>	assistant of the <i>pahan</i> . The word literally means water-carrier.
<i>paisa</i>	money
<i>pagdi</i>	bribe
<i>pahan</i>	the spiritual head of the village
<i>pakorās</i>	fried lentil and/or rice snack
<i>parha</i>	a type of sacred tribal socio-political system of governance. In which a cluster of villages forms a <i>parha</i> .
<i>pc</i>	short for 'percentages'. usually used to refer to the percentage off a development programme to be illicitly gained in its implementation.
<i>purohit</i>	priest
<i>raiyat</i>	tenants
<i>rabi</i>	November-March season
<i>rajniti</i>	politics

<i>rakhni</i>	mistress
<i>ropa</i>	rice transplanting season
<i>sadan</i>	long-settled and mainly agricultural communities of non-tribal origin
<i>sahia</i>	a friend with whom an official bond is tied to make the friend a like a kin
<i>sajha</i>	share-cropping
<i>sal</i>	<i>shorea robusta</i>
<i>samaj</i>	community
<i>sarkar</i>	state
<i>suction</i>	a word deriving from 'suck', 'to suck', but most closely indicating exploitation that leads to weakening
<i>tanr</i>	upland
<i>tapu</i>	island
<i>zamindar</i>	landlord

**Figure 1: Map to show Jharkhand**



## Introduction

### Preamble

I begin this thesis by describing a chain of events that were initiated by wild elephants between November 2000 and May 2002 in the area around Tapu village, Ranchi District, Jharkhand State, India. I want to consider the central questions of this thesis in the light of these events. This presentation of my argument is inspired by Gluckman's, 'Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand' (1958).<sup>1</sup> Describing the opening of a new bridge in Zululand, he isolates the important elements of the ceremony, and then traces them back into the wider society to demonstrate their significance.

### The Events

13 December 2000. It had been less than a month since I had moved to Tapu village. At dusk I was walking back from Nadi Tola, one of the three hamlets of Tapu, to the main Tapu hamlet when someone shouted 'elephants!' Sure enough, about a kilometre away from me, three large elephants and a baby were emerging from the Lang Tongri Jungle, one of the patches of the 60.72 acres of Tapu forest. I moved from the path to the fields where a line of people had gathered to watch them from as close as they dared. Although most people had seen elephants before, there was great excitement. The elephants were feeding off bamboo in the encroached upland fields, *tanr*, on the periphery of the forest.

People in the area say that wild elephants came to Jharkhand from Bengal. Those eating the bamboo that day were the product of a small group that had moved from the more densely forested Singhbhum Districts to the thinner Ranchi District forest areas about five years ago. In Tapu, people say that over the past two years the rapid growth of the group of elephants has made sightings more common. While in the daytime the

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<sup>1</sup> This method was subsequently taken up by others such as J Clyde Mitchell (1956) in *The Kalela Dance* or Turner (1974) in his 'social dramas'.

elephants rest in the forest, at dusk, seeking more food, they venture either to the village fields to feast on the crops, or towards the houses where *dhan* (husked rice) and grain are stored.

We watched the elephants for about half an hour. As darkness fell, they seemed to disappear back into the forest and everyone dispersed to their houses for the evening meal. I returned with Etwa Munda to his old goat house that we were converting into what would become my home. We began discussing how to carve out a small window in the mud wall to allow some daylight in, and where to put a pile of extra roof tiles he had made, that had become the playground and home of a large family of rats. In Tapu all the houses are made of mud walls on which bamboo or *sal* (*shorea robusta*) wood frameworks rest to support mud roof tiles. Some, like those of the old landlords, were more palatial. They had a maze of rooms, a storage attic, three feet wide walls, fancy roof tiles bought from outside the village, and walls around their courtyards. Most of the other houses, like the one I lived in, had sprouted up around and to the south of the old landlord's houses. They were smaller with an outer room and one or two inner rooms, one-foot walls that tapered at the top, and formed courtyards as a result of other people, of the same lineage, building houses around the same common space. Etwa's house and goat house were at the southern edge of the main hamlet, a nucleated settlement named after the village and accommodating 74 of the 102 village households.

As we were thinking about the conversion of the goat-house, the still of the night was broken by what sounded like a loud set of fireworks exploding one after the other. I suggested that it might be the villagers of Bhasnanda or Mahru trying to scare away elephants. Neither of us really paid much attention. A few minutes later there was a second explosion of cracks and bangs. Laxman Lohra, our neighbour, began shouting that elephants were destroying a house in the next hamlet, Deepa Toli, a few hundred metres away. However, again, neither of us paid attention, as we thought Laxman had as usual had one bottle of village brew too many after receiving payment for his well-reputed blacksmith work.

Suddenly we heard Chand and Neel Odhar knocking next door – ‘Etwa! Wake up. Have you gone to sleep?! Don’t you know that the elephants are destroying Wahib’s house?!’ We opened the goat-house door just as a mass of people gathered in our courtyard. Many were carrying bits of cloth wound around a pole and dipped in kerosene to make a lighted torch, a *mashal*. I distributed my two kerosene lamps and two battery torches and then began making *mashals* from old bits of cloth. As the lanterns were lit, I could hear Etwa’s eldest brother, Somra, protesting that he didn’t want to contribute his brass plate and sticks (that he used for his spirit appeasing rituals) to the collection of drums and instruments that were being distributed to make warfare sounds to scare away the elephants. A group of young men and boys rushed past our house with their glowing *mashals* raised, went down the dip, skirted the pond and ran towards Wahib Khan’s house drumming and shouting (Plate 1). They were mainly the descendants of the tenants of the landlords - Mundas, two Pramaniks, and a few Lohras - but there were also two descendants of the landlords or *zamindars* of the village - Neel and Chand Odhar.

As we watched from outside our house, it became evident that the elephants had been scared away. The line of lights stopped at Wahib’s house, then moved a few hundred metres through the dispersed houses of the hamlet towards Ber Patra forest in the East, and then towards Nati Patra forest in the West. During the hour and a half that we watched the elephants being chased, we skirted the southern edge of Tapu hamlet where the Munda women, children and older men were busy making small fires. There was a sense of urgency in the air. Somra’s brother’s wife was shouting, ‘Light the fires, light the fires, when are you people going to light them – when the elephants are here?’ A Munda grandmother was panicking that her five-year-old grandson had not returned from his parent’s house in Deepa Toli. The parents had gone to the brick kilns in West Bengal and she feared he was alone. A small group of young Munda men, who had arrived after the main group left, lit two *mashals*, disappeared into the darkness, and half an hour later returned with the shaken and bewildered child.



Three elephants had attacked Wahib's house from separate directions, leaving three literally elephant-sized holes (Plate 2). The sound of fireworks we had heard had in fact been the snapping of the bamboo framework and, subsequently, the crashing of tiles as Wahib's roof fell down. Wahib's ducks were in a flurry and his goats had watched as the elephants ate away his harvest of about 30 kilograms of rice and 15 kilograms of wheat that had been stored in his front room. Wahib (a Muslim man who was probably in his early forties) and his wife had tried to hide their petrified children in the back room and had then stood paralysed in the door-way linking the two rooms.

The elephants had calmly walked away when the army of main hamlet villagers descended toward Wahib's house with *mashals* and made a commotion. The animals had visited the next village, destroyed one more house, and had been chased away, only to return to Tapu and munch away at potatoes in one of the fields. This was the usual pattern. If the elephants were in the patches of jungle near one set of villages, they would be chased away from one village to another until they eventually moved further a-field to a different set of villages - before perhaps returning to where they had started.

In response to Wahib's ordeal, Neel Odhar offered to open up the dilapidated, disused but only brick building in the village, opposite Wahib's house. It was an *anganbadi*, a pre-school, that Neel had built only a year before, when he was 27, as a contractor with funds from the Bero Block Development Office of the Ministry of Rural Development. In private, he also gave Wahib five litres of kerosene oil and firecrackers. Wahib thought they were coming from the generosity of Neel's family, but I found out from Neel that the government forest department gave the supplies, as village common property, to the village forest committee of which Neel was an executive member.

Wahib's shaken family rested in the preschool for several nights until they gained the courage to return to the inner room of their battered house. Everyone else eventually wandered back to their own quarters for the night.

At the break of dawn the next day, always crisp and very cold at that time of the year, the gathering of some of the older village men, that usually took place on the hillock outside our courtyard, had inevitably shifted to outside Wahib's house. In fact, many people had congregated around little hay fires to gaze in awe at the damage. Although wild elephants had been highly destructive in Tapu during previous years, it had always happened one and a half kilometres away in the lone hamlet of Nadi Tola, and even there the destruction had not been on this scale.

I was interested in what people were saying about the destruction and as I walked up to the crowd, I came across Neel and his distant uncle Ramesh Yadav by the pond. They were joking that Wahib had obviously not been praying to the Ganesh Devta (the Hindu elephant God). In light of all the books I had read on communal tension between Hindus and Muslims in India, my ears pricked up. But as the months went on, I realized that it was largely in the households of the Hindu landlord descendants, the Odhars, that one came across such references. Amongst most of the Munda and other tenant descendants, it seemed that little importance was given to the Hindu deity Ganesh and also that the Muslims of Tapu were never spoken of as a religious 'other' in the way that they were in Bero, the Block Headquarters, only about seven kilometres away.

Most other people at the site were more interested in replaying to each other the exact details of where Wahib and his family were when the elephants arrived, as retold by Wahib, his wife, and children. I was struck by the lack of discussion or apparent concern for rebuilding the house, or seeking government compensation. Wahib himself seemed almost apathetic about the situation and appeared not to be concerned about what to do next. Neel and Ramesh, however, had different ideas. They called Wahib over and told him that they could get him compensation for the damage. Neel said that Wahib should first get a letter to confirm the damage from Vishwanath Bhagat, the former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), who lived in Baridih village, five kilometres down the seven kilometre track from Tapu to Bero.

The crowd eventually dispersed as everyone had to go about their daily activities. Some of the women went to collect firewood in the forest, others and some of the men went to chip stone for Neel, Popat or Darshan (Neel's two uncles) in the quarries of gneissic rock in the village, others went to graze their cattle or tend their fields, and some others went to bathe in the river, the pond or the wells. A few, like Neel, went to hang around in Bero. I also left to walk to Bero where and then continued on to Ranchi to receive my sister who was coming to visit from England. On our return to Tapu, I reconstructed what had happened following my departure.

Wahib, his brother Umran, Samu Munda and his neighbour Mangra Munda had their baths, put on clean shirts and market day *lunghis* (wrap round loin cloth), ate and left together to walk to Bero. It took them more than the usual hour because of Wahib's handicap - his elephantitis foot. They proceeded slowly down the track that ran from Tapu to Bhasnanda village, through the fields of Bhasnanda, up through the degraded *sal* forest and across a stream to Baridih village. Here they stopped at Vishwanath Bhagat's brick house and knew from his parked Maruti van that he was in. After waiting under the jack fruit tree outside his house, Vishwanath saw them into his front room, wrote a letter to give to the Forest Officer, signed it and told them all to put their thumb print on it too. The group then continued to Bero.

Bero is the central administrative village of Bero Block which includes Tapu, Bero and 112 other villages. It is a dusty cluster of finished and unfinished brick constructions, of shops and government offices line the two main roads, and houses lie behind these. From a smaller village more akin to Baridih, Bero had expanded into its present form during the post-Independence period, following the establishment of the State Block Development Office in 1964. Bero developed as government officers who had been posted there chose to remain in the village after retirement, and wealthier people from surrounding villages migrated to set up businesses, build brick houses and have some independence from their home villages. Neel's brother Chand, then the proud owner of then the only motor vehicle in Tapu, a two wheeled Bajaj scooter, owned a shop in the line of shops on one of the roads, the National Highway 23. This was the Great Eastern

Road, which came 40 kilometres from Ranchi, meandered past Bero, went on to Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and eventually ended in Bombay. From his tiny shop Chand sold and repaired bicycles, fixed punctures and also ran a slightly more lucrative 'tent-house' business – setting up marquees, chairs and mattresses for big functions such as weddings.

Reaching Bero, Wahib and his companions waited for Neel by the edge of the road outside Chand's shop. Without Neel, Wahib was scared of approaching the Forest Office, as he knew that he would be shouted at and turned away. Neel, dressed in a starched and pressed sky blue shirt, beige trousers and fake grey Nike trainers bought in Ranchi, had already arrived by bicycle from Tapu. He saw them from a nearby tea shop/restaurant (locally called *hotel*) where he was munching away at *pakoras* (fried lentil and/or rice snacks) and having a cup of *chai* (tea) with his Muslim contractor associate from a village, neighbouring Tapu. They peacefully finished their tea and eventually loitered down to Wahib. Together they made their way the few hundred metres to the Forest Office. It was a Thursday, one of the two weekly market days in Bero and a busy day for the government offices. People from the surrounding villages came to shop or sell their goods and also to do any business they might have in the government offices. However, on that day almost all the staff had gone to Ranchi and there was only one *munshi* (clerk) present in the office.

The *munshi* had a look at the application and told Neel that it was inadequate as it was signed not only by too many people, but also by a '*bada*' (big) person, Vishwanath Bhagat. The ex-MLA's signature would make the application invalid as it apparently meant that Wahib was not poor. He gave Neel an application format and told him that the Forest Office would only pay compensation for crops. For compensation for a house, he would have to apply separately to the Block Development Office of the Ministry of Rural Development down the road. Wahib, Umran, Samu Munda and Mangra Munda returned to Tapu disappointed but not surprised.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Wahib continued to earn daily wages of about Rs50<sup>2</sup> a day, by digging a road to connect Deepa Toli to Nadi Tola, the hamlet by the river, for Sachin Yadav, a distant cousin of Neel. Sachin had gained contractorship of the Block Development Office scheme to build the road. These relatively high daily wages were important for Wahib as he did not grow enough rice in the year for his family's annual subsistence and hence needed the supplementary income to purchase rice from the Adhikari family (another landlord descendant family) in the village. The government daily wage was much better than Rs35 a day earned from chipping stones for the Odhars or working in the fields for others in the village.

On Sunday night Neel wrote a new application for Wahib. Neel told Wahib to find out from Neel's uncle, Manoj Odhar, the plot number for his house. Manoj had the 1932 colonial village land record, the *khatiyān*, which is still recognized as the official land record of the village. From his secret black tin case kept under lock and key, old Manoj retrieved this brittle and crumbling document. He read the never spoken but written administrative script of the colonial time, Kaithi, which nobody else in the village could decipher. Probably, as he was commonly known to do, he asked Wahib to give him Rs10 for a bottle of *mahua-pani* (a local liquor distilled from the flower of the mahua tree, *madhuca indica*) (although I forgot to ask Wahib). When I had wanted to have a look at the document, Manoj had told me it would cost me Rs200 and that I should give it to him as a good daughter would give to a father. In my desperation to get the document, which I had thought in Ranchi was going to cost me Rs8000 as fees to an advocate, I had given Manoj an advance of Rs50. However, I never received a copy and eventually found out that he only had half the document. The other half was with Neel's family who had completely denied its existence to me. Wahib, more successful than I, got all he needed from Manoj. Neel then wrote two applications for him: one for the Forest Office and one for the Block Development Office.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, £1 was equivalent to Rs72 although over the period of my stay, it varied between Rs65-73.

Neel advised Wahib to go with his uncle Popat Odhar to the Forest Office as Popat knew all the officers and as Wahib told me, 'some were even scared of him.' But Popat had still not returned from a trip with the Department for International Development (UK) funded Eastern India Rain-fed Farming Project (EIRFP), where he was allegedly representing the poor. On Monday, however, Ramesh Yadav (Neel's more distant uncle) offered to accompany Wahib to the Forest Office. Once again he was told that the application was not sufficient and that they needed exact measurements of the damage. Wahib did not even bother trying to approach the Block Office and Ramesh had no more time to spare as he wanted to buy oil, soap and spices in the market for his weekly household needs. Once again Wahib returned home without having accomplished his task.

On Wednesday Popat returned from his EIRFP trip. By the time Wahib went to Popat's house, Popat had already heard all about his case. Popat, a tubby man, who was easily distinguishable from other men in Tapu by his rotund belly, lived with his family in a house that shared Neel's courtyard. Wahib had a conversation with Popat that I never fully found out about, but it was agreed that Popat would take him to the Forest Office the following day. The next day, again a market day being Thursday, Wahib left for Bero on foot at 7.30am. Popat cycled a couple of hours later, and at 10.30am they gave the application to the Forest Guard who Popat knew well. The guard said that Forest Officers would visit Wahib in the village the next day. Popat then rushed off to Ranchi on some other secret mission.

On Thursday I returned to Tapu. On Friday two Forest Guards arrived in Tapu on a motorcycle. They were there to inform the people of Tapu, and the surrounding villages, that there would be a meeting about the elephant destruction at 10.00am the following day in the neighbouring village of Haranji. Furthermore, the Conservator of Forest (CF) and District Forest Officer (DFO) were going to come from Ranchi. As far as I could tell, the guards only spoke to Umran (Wahib's brother) and me – and only because the two of us were chatting on the path on which they arrived. Popat, Neel and Chand had already been informed in Bero about the meeting. In the evening, I had gone to Wahib's

house and realized there that his brother had not told him about the meeting. Wahib defended Umran and said he probably thought the meeting was not important. I told Wahib that we (my research assistant, my sister and I) were going to go, and if he wanted, we could all go together. Wahib agreed and said he would be by my door at 9.00am.

By 9.30am the next day, Wahib was nowhere to be seen and so we decided to set off on foot without him. Our route took us past Wahib, who was merrily spreading the mud on the road he was helping build. He had decided that there would not be any point in going and was going to carry on working. On my naïve insistence that he accompany us, he said he would get ready and meet us there. By 10.15am we arrived at Haranji School where the meeting was to take place. However, the schoolteachers, sitting outside the schools, told us that there was no Forest Office meeting scheduled for that village that day.

A man who had just come from the neighbouring village of Ber Toli told us he had seen the Forest Guards there. So on we continued. Half an hour later, we saw three of the Forest Guards and a Forest Officer. But there were no villagers in sight. The Forest Officers had no idea of the exact purpose of the meeting and could only tell us that the CF from Ranchi had called it. By 11.00am a few people from the surrounding villages had gathered. At around the same time as Wahib appeared, two more Forest Guards arrived from Bero and said that the meeting had been cancelled – the DFO and CF could not make it.

While we were speaking to Bhim, a man living in Ber Toli but brought from Bengal and employed by the Forest Office for his special skills of chasing away elephants, I overheard a conversation between a forest guard and a man from a nearby village who had come to give an application for compensation for the damage done to his house by an elephant (Plate 3). The Forest Guard was shouting at the man, 'What is this? Rubbish? Is this the way to write an application? This will not do! You have nothing about lengths and breadths! Go home and do it all again and don't bring it back to me

unless it is perfect!' I imagined that this was pretty much how Wahib would have been dealt with had Popat not acted as the facilitator.

Eventually, we strolled back to Tapu with Wahib. I thought I realized why nobody else from Tapu had been foolish enough to come; why Umran had not even bothered to tell Wahib about the meeting; and felt guilty that I had taken Wahib away from a day's work. I was still naïve about how such meetings were locally reputed to function. As for those that I expected to be there like Neel and Popat, who were always present in meetings in and outside the village, they had already found out from Bero about the cancellation.

The next day, Sunday, we left for Jahanabaj, a village neighbouring Tapu to visit a friend who lived there. We returned before dusk, so as to avoid encountering the elephants on our way home. In the meantime, some of the Forest Guards had come to Tapu for a meeting, however, nobody could tell us what the meeting was about. Those that came to our house that night were only sceptical: 'It was so that Popat could "build relations" with the officers'. Indeed it seemed that they had not ventured further than Popat's house. A one kilogram chicken had been cooked, and there had been much drinking. Popat himself, who over the course of my one and a half years in the area never had time for an interview, and who always seemed to be dodging me when I wanted to speak to him, fumbled to tell me what it was all about: 'It was about the neighbouring villagers stealing wood from Tapu jungle and encroaching on Tapu land.'

From the next day, I had one more non-informant – Wahib. I later figured out that Popat had strictly instructed Wahib that if he wanted help, he should not reveal any more information to me. I suspected that Popat was afraid that, in recounting stories to me, Wahib would reveal the illicit activities Popat was involved in. Indeed, on that day Popat had taken Wahib away from talking to me to his own house and from then it seemed that Wahib didn't share anything more than trivial jokes with me. Certainly there were no more stories about communication with the government offices, or about how he received compensation.



As I cannot complete Wahib's story, I want to continue its theme by describing a similar event. I focus on the issue of compensation rather than on the mishap itself. In February 2001, a couple of months after Wahib's house had been destroyed, Wahib's daughter and my friend Jubu Badaik's mother, who was in her fifties, were collecting firewood in the Lang Tongri Jungle at dawn when they suddenly came face to face with an elephant. Wahib's daughter made a quick get away. She ran, tripped, picked herself up and rushed out of the forest into the village to tell the others. Jubu's mother, however, was not so lucky. Stunned, by being so close to such a terrifying sight, she says she cannot remember exactly what happened and may indeed have lost consciousness. What she recalls, however, is that the elephant trumpeted and moved towards her, snatched the wood she had collected, kicked her, and then wandered away as she lay on the ground waiting for it to finish her off.

In the meantime Wahib's daughter had met someone and, as people had just woken up and were making their way to and from the closer patches of forest to go to the toilet, word of the tragic event spread quickly. Soon a huge crowd of people including myself rushed to the forest to see what had happened. It felt like the whole village, including those people that one rarely sees in public places - like Neel and Chand's mother and father and Neel's father's brother's wives - had gathered. Jubu, Jubu's father, Samu Munda and Sukra Munda arrived with a *charpoy* (a bed made of a bamboo frame across which jute rope is stretched in a criss-cross net), and carefully lifted Jubu's mother onto it. Under instruction from Neel's family, they carried the bed to the Primary Health Centre in Bero.

It was market day in Bero and a large crowd had gathered outside the health centre by the time I got there, six hours after Jubu's mother had been kicked. They had registered the incident with the police. The doctor recommended that Jubu's mother be taken to Ranchi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) as she could not be treated in Bero.

However, there was a problem that day was because of a Ranchi *Bandh*<sup>3</sup>, a blockade, called by All Jharkand Students Union who were protesting against the proposed policy of the government on reservations. No public vehicles were leaving from Bero to Ranchi. In the hope that the Block Development Officer (BDO – head of the Block Office) would prove more responsive to me than the shaken Jubu, I told Jubu and his aunt to accompany me to ask the BDO for a government vehicle. The BDO, with an office full of people with some request or paper to sign, told us his car had ‘gone to the field’ but that the medical clinic had a car we should ask for. The doctor refused to see us at first. But after our repeated knocking he came out and saw me, and apologetically said that his car had just taken a patient to Ranchi.

In the meantime a local journalist had suggested that Shiv, who is of the same caste as Neel, should ask the then local MLA, Dev Kumar Dhan, who had just arrived in Bero for his vehicle. Shiv had almost done so, but then suspected it was an elaborate ploy on the part of the journalist, who was a keen supporter of the opposing party, to write a story on how the MLA refused his car for a poor needy person. Shiv felt that the MLA required his own vehicle as he had to travel a long way.

Eventually a normally public jeep was hired out at twice the normal rental charge because no other cars were running. Neel gave Jubu’s father, Mahadeo Badaik, Rs1400 on loan for the costs they were likely to incur. Like Wahib before him, Mahadeo thought the money was coming out of Neel’s own pocket, and that he was lending it out of the kindness of his heart. In fact the money belonged to a village group fund set up by the EIRFP of which Neel was a treasurer and Popat the president. Moreover, all other villagers, whether they knew it or not, were members! By the evening Jubu, and his father and mother arrived at the RMCH where she stayed for fifteen days after which she was given leave to have bed rest in Tapu for the coming months.

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<sup>3</sup> *Bandh*'s are a type of protest in which all institutions are forced to close and often involve the blockade of all road traffic.

As a result of Popat's mediation, Jubu made an application for compensation from the government. Like many of the Munda people of the village, Jubu felt that compensation could be acquired from the state as it was, after all, partly responsible for the elephant problem because it protected the animals from being killed. The first batch of compensation money arrived in October 2001: Rs8300 with only the standard fee of Rs1000 that Jubu had to give to the Forest Guard, through Popat, as a bribe to get the cheque. For the next and major installment of Rs25000, Jubu had no news for many months. Eventually one evening in March 2002, I asked him if I should try to pursue it as I was spending more time in Ranchi and might know people who could help. Jubu agreed and I left for Ranchi to return to Bero in a couple of weeks. A friend, reposted in Ranchi as a senior officer in the Forest Service, looked into the matter concerned and told me that due to some mistake there had been no money in the relevant fund. He said that the installment had only recently been cleared and that by the time I returned to the village Jubu should have received his mother's cheque.

I drove (by now I had a moped) from Ranchi to Bero on a Monday, hoping that as it was market day I would bump into Jubu soon, eager to tell him the good news. Jubu saw me before I saw him, but as he came over I could see that something was amiss. He was in a cloth shop with Popat Odhar, and Popat was getting some heavy material measured out. It was odd that they were together in the shop. Jubu was not only much younger, but both he and his father worked as manual contract labour on Popat's extended family's stone extraction sites in Tapu. Before I could tell Jubu my news, he told me that he had received his cheque. Alarmed, I whispered, 'And Popat's cloth? No! Is that to be a gift from you?' Before Jubu could reply, a young boy came to Jubu and said that the Forest Guard was calling him. I realized what was going on immediately, and decided to go with Jubu to the man who was sitting on a bench on the dirty pavement outside a shoe shop. I introduced myself authoritatively. I mentioned that I had spoken to his named senior officer in Ranchi, who had apologised that the sanctioning of Jubu's mother's cheque had taken so long and I told him that I hoped he had given Jubu his cheque without any problem. With that I walked off and asked Jubu to come with me.

Jubu later told me that the Forest Officer had previously informed him that receiving the cheque would be costly. The Forest Officer wanted Rs1000 for himself and another Rs1000 for all the staff in his office. As it happened, three days later I heard the unusual story that that Forest Guard had been caught in a scandal. The account, as I heard it, was as follows. The paternal aunt of a boy who was to get compensation for elephant damage and who had offered to give officers a Rs1000 bribe on behalf of her nephew to receive the cheque had turned out to be a vigilance officer in disguise. She caught the man taking the bribe, officially exposing him.

Popat, however, was another matter. He was clearly riled. Jubu had walked off with me, and there had been much whispering in front of him as Jubu retold the story. As I had been away in Ranchi, Popat got there before me and told Jubu that his cheque was available and that it was all because of his and Chand's efforts that Jubu was receiving the money. Jubu was thus obliged to make gifts not only to Popat but also to Chand Odhar. Popat had ordered his cloth but, as Jubu had walked off to meet me, Popat had no one to pay for it, and had hence left fuming. The remaining few weeks before I came back to England I felt assured that Popat would not ask Jubu for the money, but I was not certain about the weeks that followed.

Between these two incidents, Wahib's house being destroyed and Jubu getting his last installment for compensation from the Forest Office, much happened in and around Bero. In Tapu itself, four more houses were destroyed. Crops were eaten. In the hamlet by the river, people got tired chasing the elephants night after night. In the villages immediately surrounding Tapu, nine people were killed in the time I was there. Bhim, the man brought in to chase away elephants, was among the unlucky few. The total number of elephant deaths in Bero Block since 1987 is around 60 according to the Forest Department. In Jharkhand the total number of deaths over the last five years was around 230.

To Tapu residents, spotting wild elephants and having a portion of a crop destroyed (although not a house) appeared to have become a routine affair, albeit with periodic

breaks as the elephants moved to a different set of villages. In more urban centres like Bero, however, where elephants were spotted for the first time, they were a central topic of discussion and an exciting subject for local reporters to feed into the Jharkhand State newspapers. Apart from the gory details of the people being killed, one of the key issues that my informants in Bero seemed to be focusing on, and perpetuating, was that elephants attacked people who were drunk and houses that stored *mahua-pani* and *hadia* (beer brewed from rice). While it may be true, that elephants also enjoy a drink, I was struck by the fact that of the houses and people I knew had been attacked, not one had been storing or drinking alcohol at the time.

Another thematic discussion about elephants that seemed popular amongst my Bero informants, and one that kept appearing in newspaper reports, was about the connection between wild elephants and brick kiln seasonal migration. This was brought to my attention when I was living in the household of the local tribal king, *parha raja*, in Bero. This man, in his sixties, always had a stream of NGO members, journalists or social activists coming from as far as Delhi to find out the ‘authentic’ issues of tribalism, poverty and development, and to see the flow irrigation system he had built in his village that he considered a model for the area. Once I overheard him explaining why people in his model farming village continued to go to the brick kilns. He said it was because of the problem of wild elephants in the area – that people no longer wanted to farm as wild elephants were always eating the crops. Although at the time I considered this a plausible explanation, I did not come across one case in the in-depth survey I did of why people went to work in the brick kilns. Moreover, I came across two couples who had in fact returned home early from the brick kilns to rebuild houses destroyed by elephants.

I realized that the wild elephants seemed to be an increasingly popular explanation for a supposed increase in brick kiln migration when I heard the following event retold to me by some young men from Tapu. Two *angrez* (English) had arrived to view the work of the EIRFP in Tapu and asked why some of the fields that should have been fed by water from the check dam built by the EIRFP were not irrigated. Popat, having rehearsed the answer to this question with the community organiser of the EIRFP, answered that it was

all because of the elephants. There was no point in sowing seed in those fields, Popat told them, as the elephants ate the crop. And, Popat had added, wild elephants were such a problem in Tapu these days that, despite the fantastic work of the EIRFP that had immensely improved people's livelihoods, people of Tapu were still migrating seasonally to work in the brick kilns. However, as anybody who had some familiarity with Tapu would have known, the EIRFP's lift irrigation was still not actually in place and, as such, water could not be taken to the fields.

Party politicians began to organize mass meetings in Bero to discuss elephant destruction. The first occurred while I was there was in March 2001, and after that I have a record of fourteen others. Following these meetings, the most popular form of action taken was establishing road blockades, as a protest against the unfulfilled promises of the Forest Department to remove the elephants. One such road blockade happened on 4th October 2001. I had stayed the night in Bero and was on my way to Tapu in the afternoon when I realized that there was a big road blockade. People in Bero had blocked the National Highway to Bombay. There was a line of trucks, mostly carrying cattle to be smuggled to West Bengal and Bangladesh, as far as the eye could see. I followed the road to the epicentre of the blockade which was outside the Police Office in Bero. There, a mass of people had gathered around a small white bundle. I gathered that it was the body of an Oraon tribe woman from Jamtoli, a village to the east of Tapu, that had been crushed by an elephant. She had been decapitated and had lost an arm having encountered the animal in the forest that morning (Plate 4).

To one side of the white bundle was a group of villagers from Jamtoli who had brought the body to the police station. The group consisted of mainly Oraon men in *lunghis* with sticks, spears, bows and arrows, and drums in the front, and women and children at the back. In many such road blockades women and children were present although they rarely played an active role and usually followed the instructions of the leading men. On the other side of the body stood a group of young men all dressed in shirts and trousers, most of whom I knew quite well from Bero and nearby villages. They had blocked the road and told the villagers from Jamtoli to come with their hunting gear. Amongst the

most vocal of the young men was Jetha Oraon, who a few weeks before had mobilized the women of his own village to handcuff the Forest Guards when they had gone to see the elephant damage to his house. They were locked in a village community building until the senior Forest Officers from Ranchi arrived. Jetha, whose forefathers had been the tax collectors and the largest landholders in their village, had been a key member of the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* (JMM) party between 1990 and 2000, during which time Vishwanath Bhagat had become increasingly prominent until he finally won the MLA seat in 1995 and the Congress Party had fallen from dominance. Next to him was another of the key JMM activists, a descendant of the *ex-zamindars* of Vishwanath's village, Akshay Kumar Roy. Both men, although like everyone else claimed to be disillusioned by Vishwanath Bhagat, were still his supporters, yet they were also rumoured to be more increasingly involved in the expansion of the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), the most extreme left wing group of the militant Naxalite movement. Akshay and Jetha were leading the road blockade with the group of young men in shirts and trousers behind them. Around this central group, a general crowd of other people, including myself, Popat, Neel and a cousin of Neel's, had gathered to watch what was happening, swelling the mass of the blockade in doing so.

The Police Officer in charge of Bero was there as was the District Forest Officer (DFO) who had arrived from Ranchi. Whilst the men in *lunghis* and women from Jamtoli village remained silent, Jetha and Akshay took turns delivering their well-rehearsed speeches. Both speaking in Nagpuria, they repeated the same message. They criticised the government, *sarkar*, first, for not caring about the poor tribals of the area, who were suffering each day because of the elephants and, secondly, for making false promises. They demanded money for immediate compensation, and gave the state fifteen days to chase away the elephants. The DFO looked disheveled and was not given an opportunity to speak.

About an hour later Vishwanath Bhagat arrived with Ganga Tana Bhagat, the one time Congress ex-MLA who was also from Vishwanath's village. Both were dressed in their usual clothing: the former in white *kurta-pyjama* (a long sleeved baggy shirt and

pyjamas) and the latter in white *kurta-dhoti* (a long sleeved baggy shirt and loin cloth). They both made speeches and, in a similar fashion to Jetha and Akshay, strongly criticised the *sarkar*.

Eventually the Circle Officer from the Block Development Office arrived. He was particularly popular as he was a local man, a Badaik, and was given the chance to speak. He made a point of speaking in local Nagpuria rather than in Hindi, the familiar language of the DFO. He pointed out that they were doing all that they could to move the elephants away and acknowledged the suffering of the villagers. He gave Rs5000 in cash as immediate compensation to the family of the dead woman. Following his action, the DFO did likewise. On this note, the blockade was opened at 5pm. Then, at the last minute, the then MLA, Dev Kumar Dhan arrived with his army of Congress supporters. The crowd waited for him as he publicly gave a personal donation of Rs500 to the family. Finally everyone dispersed.

As I left for Tapu, I noticed Akshay and Jetha's scooters parked outside Kajal Hotel. I spotted them inside the restaurant with a crowd of other men – men who I knew that Neel, Shiv and Popat often spent time with. Kajal Hotel is a road-side eatery that Akshay had set up a few years ago. It was famous in the area for serving '*English*', which was a generic local term for Indian beers, whisky, rum and gin. I knew, as they disappeared behind the heavy blanket that separated the restaurant into an airy-open and dark-closed section, that they were beginning their celebratory drinking session that would last till the early morning, and during which they would probably cook up more agitations.

The next day I returned to Bero and visited Kajal Hotel. Akshay, Jetha, Shiv, Neel and a few others were pouring over the news reports of the previous days events that were published in the Ranchi-based *Prabhat Khabar*. They were outraged to find that the description of who was there was wrong despite the fact that the reporter had been at the blockade. The paper reported that Vishwanath Bhagat and Dev Kumar Dhan had led the blockade, when in fact they (and especially the latter) had only arrived at the end. It also claimed that two other young men, who had both become active workers of a new party,



(*Adivasi Jharkhand Janadhikar Manch*), were central in the blockade, when in fact they had not been present at all. But for Akshay and Jetha the most infuriating thing was that their own names were not mentioned at all. They immediately concluded that, whilst the first two errors (that Vishwanath Bhagat, Dev Kumar Dhan and the new party workers were central to the blockade) could be overlooked, their own omission resulted from the named young men paying off the local reporter.

### **The Issues**

Animals have often been considered 'good to think with' (Levi-Strauss, 1962; Fortes, 1966; Descola, 1992). In the Tapu area, wild elephants, perceived as predatory and dangerous outsiders to be expelled from the forests and villages, wild elephants have become a suitable symbol for political processes within the area. As such, wild elephants are good to think with about local understandings and experiences of the state.

In 1947 India achieved independence from the British and the country passed into the hands of a nationalist elite led by Nehru. The elite dreamt of transforming India into a sovereign and democratic republic, a vision that was to be achieved through the mechanisms of a modern developmental state. Nehru believed that a central purpose of this independent state was to liberate the minds and bodies of ordinary Indians by deliberate acts of economic and social transformation.<sup>4</sup> As such, the people of India have now lived in a postcolonial nation state for more than half a century, an experience that has led many commentators to consider the impact of the independence dreams of democracy and development.

Like many regions in India since independence, the Jharkhandi area has witnessed the promise of economic, social and political transformation through the expansion of the

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to forget that a concern for progress, development, had informed British policy during their colonial rule (Ludden, 1992).

'modern state'. Large landlords, *zamindars*, and their intermediation between the government and the actual tillers of the soil were abolished in the early fifties in Jharkhand with the Bihar Land Reforms Acts. As a result of the democratic vision of the modern state, during the first general elections of independent India in 1952, a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) was elected for the Bero constituency seat in the State Assembly, *Vidhan Sabha*, of the (then) Bihar State Parliament. Reflecting the pattern in India more generally, this election was followed by further democratic elections for the seat at least every five years thereafter. In the 1960s, the developmental functions of the state were introduced. For example, the Block Development Office of the Ministry of Rural Development was established in Bero in 1964. And, in response to concerns in the 1980s for 'whose reality counts' (Chambers, 1997), the design of development programmes came to reflect the now almost mandatory concern for 'participatory' approaches, as well as the supposed radical challenge to established power structures that these schemes were allegedly to provide. Furthermore, as a result of some criticism of the state, non local-government institutions sprung up and were fuelled by the belief that they were even more in 'touch with the people' (Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Paul, 1991; Fisher, 1994), such as the EIRFP which was supported by the U.K. Department for International Development.

For a long time there has been a movement campaigning for Jharkhand to gain independence from Bihar. This was based on the idea that Jharkhand was a tribal area but had been made a colony of the Hindu caste dominated Bihar State. The movement finally gained independence on 15th November 2000, the day I arrived to do fieldwork in India, a culmination that seemingly signaled the 'success of India's democracy' (Kohli, 2001). In the years prior to this, the Jharkhand Liberation Front, or JMM, had led the campaign; and it was the JMM that held the MLA seat in Bero between 1995 and 2000. More recently, however, there has been an increase in the activity of so-called 'non-state', 'people's liberation movements' like the Naxalites, also seen by some as a democratizing force (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000). The Naxalite's explicit aim is to overturn the established power structures and to empower the common poor people through armed struggle (Bhatia, 2000). In the Tapu area, the Naxalite group, the MCC,

gained country-wide media coverage after a massacre in 1999 where nine people were killed and many more injured, in a day-light shooting in a village market about nine kilometres from Tapu.

Despite these events that might be interpreted as a response to the expanding reach of the state, and even as an indicator that the processes of democracy and development are well under way in Jharkhand, I was struck by the historical continuities that the events initiated by the wild elephants in the Tapu area seemed to demonstrate. Instead of highlighting change, they made me wonder about different understandings and processes of the state.

The descendants of former landlords, such as Neel and Popat Odhar, were usually the main beneficiaries of state development schemes. They sought to control democratic processes, and mediated the interaction between the state and non-state actors. For example, when the Forest Officers came to Tapu for a supposed meeting, they rarely spoke to the majority of villagers, and actually only wined and dined in Popat Odhar's house. In fact, it appeared that many of the resources coming from the Block Development Office, or worse from the 'village common property' such as the EIRFP set-up fund or kerosene from the Forest Office, were interpreted by the most of tenant descendants to be the possessions of *zamindar* descendant families. When such resources were given to tenant descendants they generally understood it to be the generosity of *zamindar* descendants. This reinforced the fact that in many instances, tenant descendants still appeared to treat *zamindar* descendants as *zamindars*.

For instance, why did ex-tenants, such as Wahib, seem almost apathetic towards approaching the government for state resources to which they were eligible? When they did acquire state resources, why was it through the mediation of certain *zamindar* descendants? And moreover, why did it almost always appear that tenant descendants attempted to acquire state resources only because of encouragement by *zamindar* descendants?

I was also struck by the blockade in Bero and the apparent disjunction it drew between two groups of people. On the one hand the poor victims of elephant damage from a small village, and on the other, the local political elite based from Bero. Why were the victims not voicing their problems to the government and why did they appear to be only 'show pieces' for a more vocal political elite. Was this elite really concerned about the great problems of elephant harassment faced by the villagers? If so, why was their main concern the next day about the fact that somebody had managed to bribe the local journalist to portray a particularly skewed account of who was present at the blockade? More importantly, when they arrived at the blockade, why did the MLAs, the elected representatives of the state, position themselves so strongly against the state officials whom they called '*sarkar*' - the Foresters, the Block Development Officer and the Police? Why did this elite appear to come across as almost anti-state? Lastly, I was struck by the repeated motifs about the elephant events that were invoked by the political elite in Bero. Despite there being very little evidence, why did they argue firstly that it was the village brew that attracted the elephants to the houses, and, secondly, why did they propose that a consequence of elephant harassment was an increase in casual labour migration to the brick kilns of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar?

I wondered what these observations might indicate about the social processes in the Tapu area. And I wondered what light this might shed on debates about the modern state in India. These, then, are the themes and focuses of this thesis. My research reveals the political dominance of established elites in Tapu and the surrounding villages. A central question that the fieldwork came to pose was how and why structures of domination continue, albeit in new ways, despite more than half a century of Indian independence. Through a social anthropology of rural Jharkhand, the thesis thus seeks to illuminate how and why certain groups exert their influence within the modern state in India, and why others do not.

In order to frame the way in which I have explored these research questions, the discussion now needs to turn to the development of different conceptions of the state in India. These conceptions are shown to have underpinned certain sets of questions about

the state and, in turn, to have led to particular sets of answers. In doing so, whilst providing a critical lens through which to view the state, I argue that they have, in part, also rendered opaque the complex ways in which local people interact with and understand the local state.

## **The Debates**

Just before moving to the mud huts of Tapu, I had spent the summer in carpeted and air-conditioned corridors above a sign that read, 'Our dream is a world free of poverty', in the shiny glass atrium of the World Bank in Washington DC. 'The Bank', like many such international development agencies, was at the time particularly focused on questions about good governance. This concern was that their initial hopes of achieving strong government in many postcolonial states, through development and progress, had faded. In post-independent Africa, governance was often interpreted as resembling 'a return to "the heart of darkness"' (Bayart, 1993), of which a central feature was the 'criminalisation of politics' (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, 1999). In Russia, the spread of democracy since 1991 was often associated with a spread of 'corruption, opportunism and crime' (Handelman, 1999: 3 – quoted in Humphrey, 2002: 127).

In India, offering pessimistic accounts of the Nehruvian vision, much recent scholarship has argued that the projects of development, democracy and nation-building have largely failed. Many reasons are proposed. Some see this failure as an inevitable condition. The Indian state is rent-seeking and predatory; poor government performance is a result of the activities of state officials who act in their own self-interest, and who gain support by distributing public resources to their own supporters. Indeed they are seen to maximize their income by raising rents on allocational resources for which they are responsible, and taking bribery, smuggling and black marketing (Kreuger, 1974; Lal, 1988; Bhagwati, 1993). The consequence, as Robert Wade demonstrated with regard to the management of irrigation canals in south India (1985) is that the 'modern state' is far from being a public interest state.

Whilst, with respect to certain sections of the Jharkhandi population, I will show that an instrumental view of the rent-seeking state can provide a useful understanding of the processes of the state, I also demonstrate that it renders particular social processes opaque. The first pitfall of the concept of rent seeking is the policy recommendations it can foster, either explicitly or by default. For instance, state-minimalist policies of liberalization and deregulation have been promoted as antidotes to inefficiency and corruption.<sup>5</sup> Indeed in the 1980s and 1990s development policy in India has been dominated by the neo-liberal paradigm of 'rolling back' the functions of the state (Toye, 1987). In many developing countries, state intervention can be understood as a necessary enabler of economic growth and social development (Wade, 1990). The market, championed by neo-liberalism as the 'successor' to the state, is not as free-standing as the notion of 'free-market' might imply (Platteau, 1994; Harriss-White, 1996). Moreover, the neo-liberal belief in privatization ignores the evidence that, whilst private sector employment in India is often a breeding ground for communalism, state sector employment can be more capable of fulfilling the Nehruvian vision of progressive social integration (Parry, 1999).

The second critique of this analysis of the state concerns its tendency to assume that state officials are always acting as just maximising individuals. In fact, as this thesis will show, instead of individual optimization, particular acts of corruption may simply adhere to a regulated set of practices that have illicitly, but not necessarily amorally, developed around particular state activities. In this way, as this thesis will show, the rent seeking view of the state takes little account of the cultural evaluations that develop around state activities, and as such, may hamper a deeper understanding of state 'failure'. Corruption, for example, is always seen as a problem. But little space is given to the more nuanced accounts, uncovered in some recent anthropologies of the state, of how ordinary people differentiate and ethically evaluate particular types of action (Humphrey, 2002; Parry,

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<sup>5</sup> Although Kreuger (1974) does not make policy recommendations and Wade (1982) makes suggestions only with reference to the transfer system and increasing social control of the bureaucracy.

2000; Osella and Osella, 2001; Yan; 1996), and how there may be a moral economy to actions otherwise seen as illegal (Thompson, 1971).

A third critique of the rent-seeking conceptual analysis of the Indian state is its focus on the state per se. This has underpinned a lack of concern for the state to be seen as part of a broader political economy of India. Other accounts understand state failure to result from conflict between three dominant propertied classes: the rich farmers; the industrial capitalists; and the public sector professionals and white-collar workers (Bardhan, 1988).<sup>6</sup> State failure, it is argued, is a consequence of conflict between dominant classes all of whom have vested interests (between, for instance, urban-industrial versus agricultural-rural, or bureaucratic versus industrial). Conflict over these interests makes the Indian state poor at making hard choices and politically difficult decisions about the state's active development functions. This, in turn, has 'serious repercussions on the fortunes of economic growth and of the democratic polity' (Bardhan, 1988: 53). Bardhan's analysis resonates with more historical accounts about the decline of the Congress party from the 1960s, and the 'crisis of governance' that this is argued to have precipitated (Frankel and Rao, 1989; Kohli, 1990). Considering the state to have become too responsive to particular 'demand groups' (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987) it is argued that the state has failed to prosecute development plans that are in the more general interest of all people.<sup>7</sup> Some accounts are also sensitive to the possibility that the performance of different states in the Indian federal system as dependent on their respective political regimes (Frankel and Rao, 1989; Harriss, 1999; Kohli, 1987).

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<sup>6</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) also see the state as a 'third actor', a political class, consisting of public sector employees and managers, petty and high-level officials, professionals and elected politicians who control state property, resources and authority (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987: 62). For others, such as Vanaik (1990), however, the dominant class is primarily constituted of the agrarian bourgeoisie and the industrial bourgeoisie.

<sup>7</sup> This argument must, however, be tempered as suggested by Corbridge and Harriss (2000) and Kaviraj (1984), that there were large problems emerging at the time of Nehru too. Its importance, of course, is in placing central the bureaucratic-politician nexus to the study of the modern state.

These are important critiques where the state is in fact profoundly penetrated by social forces. In this respect, a departure is made from earlier World Bank approaches which drew boundaries between the state and society, and which interpreted the state as an ahistorical 'black box', which lacked distinctive characters. In turn, however, these critiques have their own shortcomings. For instance, a common trait is that little concern is given to the powerful critique which considers the modern state as a historically specific promoter of development and modernity, and one that is culturally unsuitable for countries like India. They remain focused on analysing behaviour to the exclusion of values, and the political to the exclusion of the cultural.

Promoting this deeper culturalist critique, it has been argued recently that the failure of the Indian state can be understood as India's 'natural' rejection of imposed social change and, furthermore, as evidence of a broader pattern inherent in India's experiments with modernism (Nandy, 1998; Inden, 1990; and Madan, 1997). This has led some commentators to argue that the particular problems India continues to experience, follow from the paradox of trying to establish a modern state without an industrial revolution (Moore, 1966). Others, developing this analysis, follow Gramsci to argue that, as a result of the weakness and political isolation of the modernizing bourgeoisie from the popular masses, social transformation in India has been attempted through a state-bureaucratic agency and a 'passive revolution' that substituted planning for political reform. In this account, proposed by Kaviraj (1984; 1991; 1997) and Chatterjee (1986; 1993),<sup>8</sup> transformation is not seen as a process driven from within society, but as a function of domination. The basic tenet of this argument draws on Dumont and his seminal book *Homo Hierarchicus*, to argue that kingly or secular power in 'traditional Indian society was clearly "encompassed by" and subordinate to religious values' (Dumont, 1980: 6-7). As a consequence, it is argued, the ideas of the modern state and its institutions can

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<sup>8</sup> Chatterjee's later work is in some ways more influenced by Foucauldian ideas. In 1994, for example, he describes development planning as a legitimising instrument of the nationalist elite for their authority over the central state: development planning was created as of a superior order and given a status outside of politics – a new tool for the neo-colonial domination of the state apparatus by the Indian elite (Chatterjee, 1994).



never properly be understood by Indians because such ideas are not rooted in the moral core of India society, and their central purpose has been to marginalize the political order (cf. Chatterjee, 1986; 1993; 1994; Kaviraj, 1984; 1991; 1997; Madan, 1997; Nandy, 1989; Saberwal, 1996).<sup>9</sup> This inherent problem is seen to have underpinned the severe lack of popular support for, and understandings of, the Nehruvian project of 'modern India'.

These accounts have been particularly influential in debates on the Indian state and I am sympathetic to aspects of the critique they provide. For instance, they powerfully suggest that the success of Independence plans for the modern state were dependent on the ability of the state executive to be autonomous from India's propertied elite in order to carry out its work at the local level. They also provide a persuasive critique of how a small elite at Independence sought to speak on behalf of the society in general. Moreover, they draw attention to the lack of popular support for, and the lack of popular understandings about, important aspects of the Nehruvian project. It is in accounting for this last point that my analysis diverges.

Leaving aside the well-rehearsed debate as to whether traditional Indian society does indeed marginalize the political order (cf Dirks, 1987, Raheja, 1988),<sup>10</sup> the culturalist

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<sup>9</sup> These authors of course all place different emphasis on the ideas of the state in India. Madan (1997) for example investigates the concept of secularism while Kaviraj (1984) and Chatterjee (1986) are more interested in the notion of the developmental state. While I do not want to essentialise the differences between their arguments, I also do not wish to go into a detailed discussion of their theses here. See Fuller and Harriss (2001) or Vanaik (1997) for an overview.

<sup>10</sup> Dumont's (1980) theory has been challenged by those who draw on Hocart, most notably Dirks (1987), but also several others (cf Raheja, 1988). Dirks' (1987) argument is that Dumont (1980) was duped into his model of traditional Indian society as colonialism created much of what is now accepted as Indian 'tradition'. In contrast, Dirks' (1987) drawing on his ethnohistorical study of the little kingdom of Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu argues that in precolonial India it was the king and not the Brahmin who was played the central role in the social organization of caste. The king was therefore not inferior to the Brahmin, and the political domain was not encompassed by the religious domain. Dirks' (1987) argument on the relationship between politics and religion, however, has been damningly criticized (cf Parry, 1998 and Peabody, 1991).

critiques must, however, be understood to paint a problematically static picture of Indian society and the state. Indeed the modern history of India shows instead how many Western ideas have been absorbed into Indian society forming a part of its consciousness (cf Srinivas, 1966) – a point powerfully made by Beteille (1986, 1996). Moreover, as Kothari (1972) argued, this emerging modernity has not meant the abandonment or suppression of so-called traditional social and cultural institutions, like for instance caste, but to an important degree that they have been adaptively transformed. Indeed, this is shown by Cohn (1955) in a very early ethnography of the 1952-53 panchayat election in Madhopar village, Azamgarh District, Uttar Pradesh. Here, Chamars and other lower castes formed a tenant party and overthrew the Thakurs who politically had long dominated the area. Although the Thakurs soon regained power, the election result was an early indication of the way in which traditional power structures could be challenged through the democratic constitutional structure, as well as of the opportunities for material and status enhancement that democracy offered individuals at the very grassroots of India (cf. Gupta, 1998; Wadley, 1994).

In this vein Khilnani's (1997) celebrated book, *The Idea of India*, argues that the modern state in India has had a far-reaching influence throughout the country and that the history of India since 1947 is the history of the state and the idea of democracy. This is reinforced by Corbridge and Harriss who state that, 'India's peasants have come to play a significant role in the democratic polity, both in terms of their participation in social movements ... and in elections that must be held at least every five years at the national, regional and ... local levels' (2001: 200). Indeed, recent ethnographic work on the state in India shows how local level struggles reflect both the state's failings and a related understanding of how the state ought to behave (Gupta, 1988). As Parry (2000) shows for the area around the Bhilai Steel Plant in Chhattisgarh, the widening practices surrounding, and discourses about, corruption is one example of this dual recognition that the expanded reach of the state is also a testimony to a local level internalisation of its norms and values. 'Corruption has seemed to get worse not (only) because it has, but also because it subverts a set of values to which people are increasingly committed'

(Parry, 2000: 53). As such, local people may be seen to challenge official corruption on the basis of both an understanding and an acceptance of state ideas.

In addition to these transformations, culturalist critiques, and in particular that of Chatterjee, suggest a problematic vision of the future. This includes the resurrection of the virtues of the fragmentary, the local, the subjugated and most vitally the community, in order to unmask the very heart of modern rationality (Chatterjee, 1993). In fact, the last chapter of Chatterjee's (1993) *Nation and its Fragments* is about the sense of loss of the 'community' and the need to restore it. However, in this thesis I show, as has Mosse (1997; 2001) in his historical ethnography of irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu, that the local 'community' is often dialectically generated by the modern state. And furthermore, Chatterjee's (1993) ideas about the recovery of a lost tradition ignore local politics and the possibility that the 'traditional community' is actually saturated in unequal power relations. As Corbridge and Harriss argue in response to Kaviraj's suggestion of the translation problems between India's 'upper' and 'lower' orders, 'this is undoubtedly the case, but the translation problems are made worse by concerted acts of sabotage or violence by local elites who are concerned to frustrate the developmental ambitions of the state (ambitions which they understand [only] too well)' (2000: 205).

To what extent can we thus generalise about the 'lower orders' (or the 'upper orders'<sup>11</sup>) as one unitary mass of people with common (mis)understandings about the role of the state? Are there people in small rural towns or villages in Jharkhand who clearly understand the ideas behind the modern state? And if so, who are they and under what conditions and for what reasons do they behave in ways that appear not to reflect the intentions of the central state? Conversely, are there people who understand neither the state's role as servant of its citizens, as a guarantor of an unmediated particular social order, nor their roles as deserving citizens? And if so, who are they and under what conditions and for what reasons are their understandings of the state at odds with those

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<sup>11</sup> Although, this part of the opposition, 'the upper orders', that results as a default of the labelling of 'lower orders', is not one which is discussed in this thesis.

intended by planners in the capital of India or even those developed by the federal state of Jharkhand?

The debates elucidated so far enable useful insights about the understandings of the modern state in India. However, what remains far from clear is the extent to which these arguments represent the everyday experiences of the state by different groups of people in India. In this respect Spencer argues that anthropology's neglect of politics and the post-colonial state has negated the study of popular political values and post colonial political institutions as these have too often been essentialised as being similar to those in the West (Spencer, 1997: 13). With limited exceptions, (Brass, 1997; Fuller and Benei, 2001; Gupta, 1995; Hansen and Stippulat, 2001; Michelutti, 2002; Mosse, 2003; Parry, 2000), the few in-depth ethnographic enquiries into these issues in India reflect the short-lived peak of political anthropology (Vincent, 1990), a peak that occurred during an earlier period of Indianist study (Bailey, 1963; Fox, 1969; Kothari, 1970; Carter, 1974; Mayer, 1981; Robinson, 1988). Not only has 'research on the state, with its focus on large-scale structures, epochal events, major policies, and "important people" ... failed to illuminate the quotidian practices ... of bureaucrats that tell us about the effects of the state on the everyday lives of people' (Gupta, 1995: 376), much remains unexplored about different people's understandings and experiences of the state. Even after fifty years of Independence, and an undeniable historical strength of Indian democracy (Khilnani, 1999), we cannot necessarily specify the form of the link between the representatives and the represented (Spencer, 1997: 12). Such silence provides real impetus for this study – an in-depth ethnographic enquiry into local politics and the state in India.

## **The Approach**

Whilst earlier attempts to 'bring the state back in' (Evans, Rueschmayer and Skocpol, 1985) treated the state as a distinct, cohesive subject, set apart from a larger entity called society or community, more recent work has illuminated the ambiguous, 'fuzzy', blurred

and often intimate connection between the 'state' and the 'people' (cf Abrams, 1988; Migdal, 1994; Mitchell, 1991). Indeed some have shown that the state has multiple centres at the local level (cf. Gupta, 1995; Fuller and Benei, 2001; Migdal, 1994).

This thesis follows these more recent perspectives. It seeks to avoid the pitfalls of separating the state from society, or of unnecessarily reifying the state. In order to do so, I have considered the fieldwork process as a social anthropology of rural Jharkhand, a process which paid particular attention to the imaginations and processes of the state, rather than an anthropology of the state per se. Moreover, I have thought it important to open myself up, in Spencer's words, 'to the empirical unpredictability of it all' (1997: 9). In doing so a range of themes, that have conventionally been distanced from conceptions of the state, are explored and considered central to understandings of the state – for instance, migration, sexual practices, drinking habits, sacred ritual, non-state popular movements, and landlord-tenant relationships. I argue that this enables a more holistic understanding of an area of rural Jharkhand which, in turn, helps to illuminate the understandings, context, role and effect of the modern state in the lives of the different people concerned.

At odds with this approach, although with a few exceptions (cf. Hansen, 2000), many anthropological accounts of the Indian state have not taken seriously an exploration of the state as 'an idea' – the notion, or as Abrams (1988) would argue, 'the false consciousness', that there is such a thing as the state. To Abrams, this is the greatest myth of modern times as 'the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practices. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is' (1988: 82). This perspective is given strength by Taussig who sees the state in Latin America, as the greatest fetish of contemporary society, an idea revered like a totem, and even one that replaces the idea of God (1992: 130). Most importantly, Taussig argues, state power is fetishised through a range of displays and spectacles, becoming an effective authority because it invades and is appropriated by everyday epistemologies of power. In Cameroon, Mbembe (1992) also shows the importance of the state as an entity excessively fetishised in pomp, ritual and entertainment. For him, the state successfully

involves the population in 'cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology' (Mbembe, 1992: 29). Building on this analysis, this thesis is not only interested in the cultural ideas that different local people hold about the state, but also in analysing the state, as Mitchell proposed (1991), as a 'structural effect'. That is, this thesis considers the political processes and understandings that make the state appear to exist as 'an almost transcendental entity set apart from the society from which it cannot in reality be clearly separated' (Fuller and Harris, 2001: 5). In doing so, I am particularly interested in exploring the contexts under which different ideas of the state are produced.

I take seriously the idea of attending to what people in my fieldwork area understand as 'the state'. Indeed, I argue that there are two contradictory understandings held by two different types of people in rural Jharkhand. The first is the local political elite who are intimately involved in processes of the state. Their understanding of it includes both bureaucrats (the administrative arm of the state) and politicians (the executive wing), and they differentiate between the two, as well as between different types of bureaucrats – for instance, the Police, Forest Officer or Block Development Officer. I also argue that the local political elite has an understanding of the idea of the state as a servant of an undifferentiated citizenry with whom it has an unmediated relationship, and as therefore a guarantor of a particular social order protected by the rule of law, and entailing various ideological concepts such as legality and democracy. As such, I provide a critique of the more static culturalist evaluations, as well as of their perspectives on the failures of the Indian state. The local political elite constantly blurs the boundary between the state and society. This happens through various forms of mediation which include participation in activities regarded as illegal but not necessarily amoral. As such, I also argue that understanding state ideas does not necessarily equate to internalizing or committing to them.

The second and differentiated group I identify is the descendants of tenants. The majority are tribal and do not associate elected politicians such as MLAs with *sarkar*. They see *sarkar* as the executive wing of the modern state and have an undifferentiated idea that it is an outside, foreign and dangerous agency. As in Nugent's account of the

post 1960s Chachapoyas, Peru, this section of the 'local populace [has come] to regard the modern nation-state as a "foreign body": an entity wholly separate from, alien to, and dangerous for a way of life depicted as simple, natural and harmonious' (2001: 275). Indeed, the state is perceived as being so foreign that tribal peasants seek to distance and protect themselves from it. Unlike the political elite, they see the state as a holistic entity. They do not accept the idea of the state as a guarantor of social order and they do not wish to engage with it. Thus, the tribal peasants reproduce a definite boundary between the state and society. This is a distinction between state and society that must be taken seriously since it is a 'defining character of the modern political order' (Mitchell, 1991: 95).

Whilst referring to the alien notions of the state held by tribal peasants, my argument remains different from those of Kaviraj and Chatterjee. I consider the ideas and practices of the state to be dynamic, non-static, phenomena. Hence, a central theme of this thesis is how there is a political economy of understandings about the state, why these ideas affect how people engage with the state, and the way they are produced and reproduced in situations of inequality.

## **Context of Fieldwork**

### **The outsidersness of the state**

While contemplating this research in January 1999, I arrived in Jharkhand as a research assistant to the geographer Stuart Corbridge who was working on two projects – one looking at the effectiveness of the EIRFP in various villages in Jharkhand and the other comparing the state in West Bengal and Bihar. After three months on these projects and aware of important questions that were not being addressed by the literature on development and the state, I was inspired to begin my own research project. I moved to Bero, a place with which I had become familiar, and started to frequent the corridors and offices of the Block Development Office to get a feel of what was going on at this most

local level of government development plans. It was here that I stayed for just over two months. With the aid of a research assistant, I continued to learn Hindi. I hence developed a basis from which to begin the next stage of fieldwork.

From this preliminary research one of the most striking aspects of the state in Jharkhand was its domination by officials who were not from the local area. Most were higher castes from North Bihar and not Scheduled Tribes from Jharkhand. In the Block Development Office, the head of the Office, five supervisory level staff, four Junior Engineers, head clerk and cashier were all from North Bihar. Except for one who was Muslim, these officers were all high castes. When I returned for fieldwork in 2000, although many of the officers had changed and there were now two Muslims, all these positions were still filled exclusively by North Biharis.

The state in Jharkhand has in fact long been criticised for its outsidersness. Weiner (1988) comments that the regional development of Chota Nagpur was unsuccessful because it was primarily migrants, not the local people, who benefitted. 'Only a small number of tribals found employment in industry. The improvement of agriculture was accompanied by what a government report referred to as the "usurption" of land by outsiders. Local services by government increased, but few tribals were employed by the expanding bureaucracy. The colleges and university grew, but few local tribal students attended.' (Weiner, 1988: 148). In fact, Weiner quotes from his interview with Lalit Kuzur that, 'the Bihar government offices in Ranchi mainly employ outsiders. The Biharis who work there even bring their own peons from their own villages' (1988: 180).

Kuzur was the founder and leader of the *Birsa Seva Dal*, an organisation that in the late 1960s launched violent attacks against landlords and led mass demonstrations in the streets of Ranchi for the creation of a tribal state (See also Chapter 4). The *Birsa Seva Dal* was one of many organisations that were part of the movement for an independent tribal state of Jharkhand. The movement began its institutional history with the formation of the Dacca Students Union, later renamed the *Chota Nagpur Unnati Samaj* (Chota Nagpur Improvement Society), by two Anglican Missionaries in the 1920s



(Vidyarthi and Sahay, 1976). Their aim was to secure reservations for tribals in government service and legislatures, employment for educated tribals, remove 'backwardness' in the Chota Nagpur by stopping the 'superstitious' beliefs of tribals and hence socially, economically and politically 'advance' the area.<sup>12</sup>

While the government was so obviously dominated by outsiders, the call for a separate state of Jharkhand that would better serve the tribals, was, however, a call of an educated (mainly Christian) tribal elite and not necessarily of the tribal peasantry in villages in Jharkhand. The literature on Jharkhand reflected these tribal elite understandings. It draws on histories of the Jharkhand movement and interviews with tribal leaders and politicians but rarely addresses an in-depth analysis of understandings of the state held by tribal peasants in rural Jharkhand (cf. Corbridge, 1986; Devalle, 1990; Jha, 1990; Prakash, 2000; Singh, 1966; 1983; Vidyathi and Sahay, 1978; Weiner, 1988). Rectifying this imbalance was one strong motivation for a social anthropology of Jharkhand based in a rural area.

While reading the literature on the Indian state in my pre-fieldwork year back at the LSE in 2000, I found that the village studies of the 1960s and 1970s seemed somewhat out of fashion despite their capacity to provide deeper understandings of the modern state. This was another strong motivation for long-term, in-depth empirical work rooted in a particular village. With this vision I moved to Tapu village in November 2000, a place I had previously visited as a target village of the EIRFP. It was the people of Tapu, and those I met through them, whose lives I became intricately involved in until I left in May 2002. I developed family, friends and over time even foes, as I inevitably became

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<sup>12</sup> It was a deputation of the *Chota Nagpur Unnati Samaj* that met the Simon Commission in 1928 and put forward the first demand for a separate state in the Jharkhand area. Its members were mainly tribal youth from an emerging educated elite of Anglicans and Lutherans. In competition, the Catholics formed an organisation with a similar mission, the *Catholic Adivasi Sabha*, which won two seats in the Bihar Legislative Assembly elections in 1937 pre-Independence elections. In 1938 all the Christian Sabhas merged to form *Chota Nagpur Adivasi Mahasabha*, which later became the Jharkhand Party, the main opposition to Congress in the Bihar Legislative Council in First State Assembly Elections in 1952 and also put forward the proposal for a separate Jharkhand State in 1954 to the States Reorganisation Commission.

involved in local power struggles. Despite much emotional distress, it was these more personal experiences of negotiating varied relationships that enabled me to have a thorough understanding of people's relationships to each other and the views and understandings which influence them.

## Tapu

For the first twelve months my main base was Tapu. Tapu, as with most of the people in this thesis, is a pseudonym,<sup>13</sup> although anyone with more than a passing interest in Bero Block will be able to identify the village. The village is situated less than 50 kilometres from Ranchi, in the undulating landscape of degraded forest typical of this part of the Chota Nagpur plateau. The area receives an annual rainfall of around 1250mm, which is concentrated mainly in the monsoon from June to October.

Nowadays all households own some land (Figure 3). The main sources of livelihood are arable and livestock agriculture, manual labour in the village stone-chipping industry, and government schemes in Tapu or the surrounding area. Paddy constitutes more than 80% of the *kharif* (monsoon) crop grown especially on medium and lowland (*doin*). Other common *kharif* crops are ragi, black gram, maize, pigeon pea and groundnut. The main crops grown in the *rabi* (November-March) season, are mustard, horse gram, linseed and groundnut in the upland, and horse gram, gram and wheat in the lowland. Vegetables are grown all year round in fields with good irrigation facilities.

In terms of infrastructure, Tapu is characteristic of the villages in the area – all mud houses, no electricity, no running water, no schools, and no public health facilities. Literacy rates are low. Of those outside education, 15% of Tapu people have an education up to Primary Class eight, 8% have passed Matriculation (the equivalent of GCSEs), 4% have passed Intermediate exams (the equivalent of 'A' levels), and 2% have obtained BA degrees.

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<sup>13</sup> I have maintained the names of persons who are widely known.

The village had around 102 households and a total population of about 550 people living in one of three dispersed nucleated hamlets spread out along about two kilometres (Plate 5 and Plate 6). Tapu people fall into the two main groups mentioned: they are either descendants of the tenants or of the landlords. In general in this area landlords were high castes, although, as I explain in Chapter 2, in Tapu they were Yadavs who are classified by the Indian government as Other Backward Classes (OBC). Tenants were generally those referred to by the present government as Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC) and sometimes Backward Classes (BC) or OBC. The last census (2001) records that about 60% of the people of Bero Block were ST. In Tapu the ST people are mainly Munda, but include Oraon, Badaik and Maheli, and the SCs are mainly Lohar. There are also Muslim (Pathans) and Pramanik tenant descendants. Although the Mundas themselves accounted for about 40% of the population of Tapu, together all the tenant descendants accounted for about 80% of the village population.

### **Describing Tapu people**

The government classifications were not always useful in portraying the way in which people in the village understand the hierarchies between the different castes and tribes. For example, the government of Jharkhand categorises the Mahelis along with the Oraon, Munda and Badaiks, as a Scheduled Tribe. In Tapu, however, in many contexts, the Mahelis were treated as the untouchable caste of the village – those who were considered by all others as the most impure. No other caste or tribe in Boda would touch the cooked (boiled or deep-fried) food of the Mahelis. (Appendix A is a matrix of transaction of boiled food between different castes and tribes in Tapu). In the hierarchy of purity and pollution, the Blacksmiths - Lohars, are seen in the village as being above the Mahelis. The government classifies them as a Scheduled Caste although some authors have argued that they are closer to some tribal groups (cf Elwin, 1958; Yorke, 1976).

Knowing how to refer to different people has always been problematic, especially in the context of Jharkhand. A distinction often made in Jharkhand is that between *adivasi* (tribals), *sadan* (long-settled and mainly agricultural communities of non-tribal origin)

and *diku* (outsiders). Such distinctions are, however, highly politicised. As Corbridge (1988) has argued, at the heart of tribal policy and politics in India for the past 100 years has been an 'ideology of tribal economy and society'. This is the view that '*adivasi*' societies are different to caste Hindu societies, that they are based on equality not hierarchy, that they have remote habitation and a primitive way of life, and even that they have animistic forms of religion (see Mandelbaum, 1970; Sharma, 2001; Weiner, 1978). British administrator-anthropologists saw tribals as noble savages to be protected. The colonial state even declared some tribal zones as 'Excluded Areas', almost 'National Parks' (cf Elwin, 1944; 1955b), where the responsibility of administration was held by the Governor of the province and not the elected government. The Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 treated tribal areas as a separate category and excluded these 'Scheduled Areas' from the operation of ordinary laws of British India. A number of special laws were enacted to protect tribals in these areas – for example the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (1908) to protect tribals from the loss of land to 'rapacious outsiders' (*dikus*) (cf Prakash, 2001). At independence, the Constitution was constructed with special provision for the administration of 'Scheduled Areas' inhabited by 'Scheduled Tribes' through the Fifth and the Sixth Schedule. Even by 1960, the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission chaired by Dhebar, and appointed under Article 339 of the Constitution, still treated tribals as the 'unspoilt children of Mother India' (Dhebar, 1962: 1:1.1). In 1995, the Commission, chaired by Bhuria and supported by B D Sharma<sup>14</sup>, in a campaign for 'Our rule in our villages', argued that tribal society's own representative system of governance should be legally recognized as the primary system of tribal governance. In December 1996, this proposition was passed in the Provision of the Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act. This

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<sup>14</sup> Sharma retired from the post of Commissioner for Scheduled Tribes and Caste in 1981 to work as an activist for 'tribal affairs'. His book opens with the following sentence, 'Let it not be said by future generations that the Indian Republic has been built on the destruction of the green earth and the innocent tribals who have been living there for centuries.' (Sharma, 2001: 3). When I met him in Ranchi in January 2002, after he had just conducted a meeting with tribal elites from as far as Orissa and Chhattisgarh, he was wearing a dhoti and a hand-woven cotton *kurta* and was keen to tell me that what I should really be studying was the economic expropriation of tribal people at the village level – on how tribals were being robbed by the state and by outsiders.

perception of tribal society as radically 'Other' to mainstream Indian society provided a powerful basis for the long-standing movement for an independent *adivasi* state of Jharkhand.

There are obviously several problems with this perception of tribals being a radically distinct group. Ghurye (2000 [1943]) marked tribals as just 'Backward Hindus'. Beteille (1974), after discussion of four criteria that had been used to distinguish tribal societies - size, isolation, religion and means of livelihood - found no satisfactory way of defining a tribal society. Others proposed a continuum from 'tribe to caste' (Bailey, 1960) or 'tribes in transition' (Majumdar, 1937). In many cases the *sadan* populations, as in the case of the Tapu Yadavs, may have historically been closer to some of the tribals than they are today (see Chapter 2). There is also a case to be made that some tribals today have formed part of a middle class (cf Corbridge, 2000; 2002) whose lives are much more akin to the *sadans* and the *dikus* than that of the tribal peasants in the village.

In this thesis, I do not argue that tribal society is essentially different. Nor do I argue that tribals are the same as other poorer villagers in rural Bihar or West Bengal. Rather, I seek to understand the ways in which distinctions between different groups of people are created and maintained so that structures of domination can be perpetuated. In particular, I aim to illuminate the way this domination functions to enable certain groups to exert their influence within the modern state system in India, whilst disabling others. Thus, after much deliberation, I have used the following distinction to represent the different types of people in the Tapu area. Firstly, there is a local elite, which consists mainly of *zamindari* descendants (who are usually higher caste Hindus - the *sadani*, but sometimes middle caste and tribal) and a tribal elite that has been educated (often Christian) and forms part of the middle class. Secondly, there are the tribal peasants who account for majority of the people who live in the villages and whose main livelihood is gained from agriculture and hard manual labour. In the Tapu area this group consists mainly of people the Indian government classifies as ST, but also of some SC populations as well as other lower castes that are not part of a political elite. As people

of the Munda tribe numerically dominated Tapu, most of my analysis of the group tribal peasant refers to people of Munda descent.

### **Doing the fieldwork**

I made every attempt to get a pluralist perspective on these different types of people in Tapu. To begin with I declined the repeated offer of 'better' accommodation by the *zamindari* descendant families of Tapu, and moved into a Munda courtyard in the main hamlet. I felt that moving into an old *zamindari* household would have significantly hindered my ability to explore tenant descendant understandings, as they would have treated me as part of the *zamindari* house. Interrelatedly, I hoped that by having a separate house, a separate cooking hearth, in a Munda courtyard, I would maintain a more autonomous relationship from the Munda people and thus have access to close relationships with members of the *zamindari* houses as well.

In the first ten months I worked with a research assistant whose main task was interpreting and who later, as I learnt the local language Nagpuria, helped me carry out a survey of the village. In these initial months the assistant was invaluable, but as the months proceeded, I found it increasingly problematic to have an assistant both in and out of the village. I conducted almost all the work outside the village on my own as I found that those who trusted me and were able to tell me about their engagement in, and perceptions of, illicit activities, and their involvement with the MCC, closed up in the presence of my local assistant. In the village too, as I became more aware of the nuances and complex relationships between people, having a research assistant became a hindrance. One evening I found myself in the house of a Munda man married to an Oraon woman eating *banda* (pig), drinking *mahua-pani* and hearing the story of their love affair and migration to the kilns. At the same time my research assistant was the *purohit* (priest) performing the *Jitia Puja* for the *zamindari* descendants in one of their houses. This night sharpened the tension of living and working with a Brahmin research assistant who was particularly liked by the higher-caste *zamindari* faction of the village, but who found it more difficult to leave aside her moralistic views of tribal drinking and

sexual practices - especially as they increasingly became a focus of my work. So for the last eight months I worked on my own.

In Tapu I focused on understanding the social structure through participant observation, open-ended individual and group discussions and recorded all this in extended field notes. I used survey methodology. I also carried out an ethnographic analysis of oral histories, of genealogies, and of politically-based networks of people. Following the events that unfolded before me, and then contextualising the way in which different people understood them, was of central importance to the way in which I undertook my fieldwork. This took me well beyond the small intimate community of the village (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), to conduct research in many of the surrounding villages, the Block development centre Bero, and even Ranchi city where more structured interviews with journalists, social activists, government administrators and politicians became important. I also spent a week living in a labour camp at a brick kiln in West Bengal. As such my work developed into what Marcus has called a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995).

Throughout my stay I maintained a base in Ranchi and in the last six months I also had a room in the house of the *parha raja* in Bero. This strategy of having different bases became particularly important as I became more intertwined in local people's lives and found it difficult to live in the highly factionalised environment of Bero Block. My room in Bero provided sufficient privacy to use as a base from which to explore the more explicitly political aspects of my work. It enabled me to carefully balance and sustain my relationship with the tribal peasants of Tapu who were often upset about my wanderings outside the village, and especially the continuous visits by outside men. It enabled me to maintain a little distance from otherwise being treated like a daughter. In contrast, the political elite of Bero and the surrounding villages treated me as a woman from the West. In fact, I tried to emphasise this position in my interactions with them as I felt that it best facilitated the collection of data of a political nature. On the one hand, being a Western woman meant that I was treated more like a man, as opposed to the standards by which they would treat their own wives or daughters, who were marginal to

the political sphere in Bero. On the other hand, I suspect it also gave me the advantage of appearing less threatening than had I been seen as a local person or a man.

## Chapter Outline

This context aided my research into the historical development of relations between the tenants and the *zamindars* in Tapu. This is the focus of Chapter 2, which examines a paradox in the relationship between these two groups. Today many of the *zamindar* descendants are materially poorer than some of the descendants of the tenants. Yet, in certain contexts the tenant descendants continue to treat the *zamindar* descendants as *zamindars*. The chapter explores the question of why *zamindar* descendants still retain the power, to, for example, redistribute particular lands to the tenant descendants of the village. To understand this contradiction, the chapter argues that it is crucial to know the context and significance of the spiritual beliefs of the descendants of the tenants who are mostly tribal, and how they differ from the religious views of the *zamindars*. Furthermore, the chapter shows that it is essential to comprehend the way in which the *zamindar* descendants (who would describe themselves as Yadav Hindus) manipulate and play on the significance of tribal spiritual beliefs to maintain control of the temporal, secular world of which the modern state is a part. In doing so, the chapter places the interrelated, but differing views, of spiritual authority and temporal power held by local political elites and tribal peasants at the centre of the analysis of experiences of the modern state.

Chapter 3 considers understandings of the developmental state in Jharkhand. It follows flows of development resources that are to be distributed to the poor by the Block Development Office, the most local level of the Ministry of Rural Development in the area. The chapter shows that most tenant descendants have different ideas of the state to most *zamindar* descendants and other political elites. On the one hand, local political elites are shown to understand (though not necessarily internalise or commit to) the idea of the developmental state as a servant of the people. They also participate in the more



material practices of government in the area. On the other hand, descendants of tenants are shown to see the developmental state as alien and dangerous, want to stay away from it and therefore, as far as possible, do not get involved in its local processes. This is not, however, a static understanding of the state. This chapter also suggests that these different ideas of the state are interconnected because it is in the interest of local political elites to perpetuate this distinction.

Chapter 4 considers understandings of the democratic state in Jharkhand. It explores the battles of two ex-MLAs around an annual, and so-called traditional, tribal festival called the *parha mela*. It elaborates how tribal peasants see the modern state as foreign and dangerous and, in particular, responsible for destroying the essence that united tribal society, the spiritually legitimated tribal *parha*. It shows how they understand the role of MLAs to be one of protecting tribal society from such malign forces. In contrast the local political elite see the role of MLAs to be one of better enabling their access to the modern state. Following from the argument developed in Chapter 3, this chapter suggests that for the political elite to maintain their dominant powerful positions, it is essential for them to create a distinction between the morally inferior temporal domain of the state and the superior ritually pure world of the sacred tribal *parha*.

Chapter 5 looks at the idea of the formation of Jharkhand as a state for the protection and development of tribal people by considering one aspect of the tribal protection drive – the campaign against seasonal migration of casual labour from Jharkhand to the brick kilns in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The chapter explores why people migrate, and in contrast to the many conventional economic based hypotheses, argues that from the point of view of the migrant, it makes little sense to understand their migration solely in terms of economic compulsion. The chapter argues that for most of those who migrate, the brick kilns are seen as a space of social and cultural freedom from an increasingly constrained village environment. The majority of those who migrate are shown to do so to temporarily escape from a problem back at home, to live out prohibited amorous relationships, to explore a new country or to gain independence from their parents. The chapter suggests that those who campaign against such migration

do so precisely because they understand the social and cultural significance of the brick kilns to the migrants. Opponents of this migration see the kilns as a threat to both their representation of the new state as well as their ideas of the purity of the social and sexual tribal citizen of the state. In contrast, I argue that for many of those that do migrate (usually tribal peasants) the brick kilns are seen as a place where people are 'free'.

Chapter 6 looks at an alternative claim for the development and liberation of the poor and exploited people of rural Jharkhand, that of the revolutionary Naxalite movement, the MCC. The chapter argues that in practice the MCC's main support is the political elite of the area and not the poor tribal peasantry. The local elite is shown to support the MCC who promise better access to state resources. The MCC thus are seen to have become intimately involved in processes of the state suggesting that, contrary to popular perceptions, in practice, the MCC is not anti-state. I suggest that, in some sense, whilst the MCC appears to stand against the present modern state, it actually projects an alternative type of state. I also suggest that this alternative vision constructs an allegedly superior modernity, which controls the drinking and sexual practices of the tribal peasantry in the name of producing better, more disciplined, more moral, selves. Such a vision, like that of the Jharkhandi activists, represents the values of the political elite, and in fact only serves to alienate the tribal peasantry.

**Figure 2: People and their land in Tapu in 1932**

**Based on the 1932 Land Survey (*Khatiyān*) of Tapu.<sup>15</sup>**

Person	Descendant today referred to in this thesis	Caste or tribe and clan	Name of the place they came from	Why the person was brought	<i>Doin</i> (lowland) in acres <sup>16</sup>	<i>Tanr</i> (upland) in acres	Other land in acres
Soma and Lodo Oraon (s/o Makua Oraon)		Oraon – later became Tana Bhagats	Haranji – Khuratoli village, Bero Block	Tenant - To control a spirit	1.48 (3) + 1.12 (2) + 1.75 (2) + 1 (3) + 0.31 (1) = <b>5.66</b>	1.94 (2) + 2.59 (1) + 0.06 (1) + 0.78 (2) = <b>5.37</b>	0.05 (kalihan) + 0.05 (house) = <b>0.1</b>
Vajid Khan +(s/o Jagar Khan) and Dhutan Khan (s/o Vajid Khan) Bhamar Khan	Wahib Khan etc	Pathan Muslim	Palarnau district	Tenant - To help collect taxes	0.53 (1) + 1.67 (2) + 0.18 (3) + 0.27 (1) = <b>2.65</b>	0.6 (1) + 0.95 (3) + 0.14 (1) + 0.61 (2) + 1.22 (3) = <b>3.52</b>	0.4 (house) + 0.01 (house) = <b>0.41</b>
Chamru Maheli s/o Bandhna Maheli)		Maheli	Kudarko village, Bero Block	Tenant - as a musician	1.06 (2) + 0.08 (3) = <b>1.14</b>	0.08 (1) + 0.23 (2) = <b>0.31</b>	<b>0.02</b> (house)
Jagarnath Maheli (s/o Jitu Maheli)	None	Maheli	?	Tenant - as a musician	0.27 (3) + 0.33 (2) = <b>0.6</b>	0.09 (1) + 0.53 (2) = <b>0.39</b>	<b>0.01</b> (house)

<sup>15</sup> Although I am certain that a copy of this document existed in Tapu, I was only able to access the copy in the District Collectorate Office in Ranchi. The *khatiyān* is written in Kaithi, which was the administrative (and not spoken) language in use at the time. Grierson advocates that the Kaithi alphabet is that of the kayasth or writing caste of Northern India (Grierson, 1903, Vol5, PtII: 11). In Tapu three of the ex-*zamindar* family members were known to read and understand it. In Ranchi, special clerks in the District Collector's office decipher the script. The information I have presented is my own summary of the *khatiyān* in relation to the genealogies of every family that I collected in Tapu. This has been an elaborate and complicated task due to the detail presented in the *khatiyān* as well as the complications of understanding the exact nature of who was represented in the *khatiyān* and their precise relation to the present day inhabitants in Tapu.

<sup>16</sup> Quality of the land is in brackets with 1 as the best. The total amount of land is in bold font.

Gulja Parn (s/o Dhaku Parn)	None	Parn	?	Tenant - ?	0.56 (2)	0.03 (1) + 0.47 (2) = 0.5	0.03 (house)
Pahlu Chic (s/o Rupnath Chic)		Badaik	Khunti Toli, Bero Block	Tenant - For cloth weaving	0.54 (2) + 0.45 (2) + 0.17 (3) = 1.16	0.03 (1) + 0.20 (3) = 0.23	0.03 (house)
Balya Chic(s/o Gandur Chic and Tanu Chic (s/o Balya Chic)	Jubu Badaik	Badaik	Khunti Toli, Bero Block	Tenant - For cloth weaving	1.43 (2) + 0.75 (3) + 0.36 (3) = 2.54	0.25 (1) + 1.65 (2) + 1.65 (3) = 3.55	0.09 (house)
Chamru Ahir (s/o Khedwa Ahir)	Shiv Gope	Ahir	?	Tenant - To graze the cattle	3.29 (2) + 0.03 (3) = 3.32	0.68 (1) + 3.12 (2) + 1.36 (3) = 5.16	0.04 + 0.05 = 0.09
Jagarnath Ahir (s/o Surat Ahir)		Ahir	Jaraloy	Tenant - To graze the cattle	1.14 (2) = 1.14	1.35 (1) + 0.59 (2) = 1.94	
Bandhna Ahir (s/o Dhidhu Ahir)		Ahir	?	Tenant - ?	0.17 (1) + 0.42 (2) = 0.59	0.62 (2) = 0.62	0.03 + 0.02 = 0.05
Shivnath Ahir (s/o Kangali Ahir)	Now in Jariya	Ahir	?	Tenant - Cook	2.34 (2) + 0.49 (3) = 2.83	0.21 (1) + 2.03 (2) + 0.3 (3) = 2.54	0.10 + 0.02 + 0.07 = 0.82
Suman Ahirin (w/o Gandura Ahir)		Ahir	?	Tenant - ?	1.04 (2) + 0.71 (3) = 1.75	0.03 (1) + 0.45 (2) + 1.35 (3) = 1.83	0.02
Samu and Temba Munda (s/o Berge Munda) and Jubhu Munda (s/o Duka Munda) and Mangra Munda (s/o Duka Munda)	Present pahan	Munda - Thithio	Haranji - Khuratoli village, Bero Block	Tenant - To control a spirit	1.07 (2) + 0.53 (3) + 0.7 (1) + 0.4 (2) + 0.86 (3) + 0.18 (1) + 1.08 (2) 0.39 (3) + 0.32 (1) = 5.53	2.71 (2) + 1.45 (2) + 0.48 (3) + 1.41 (2) + 0.33 (3) + 0.36 (1) + 0.44 (3) = 7.18	0.08 + 0.03 + 0.02 + 0.01 + 0.05 = 0.91
Bergi Munda (s/o banya)		Munda - Birla	Demba - Pipartoli,	Tenant - ?	2.26 (1) + 0.74 (2) +	2.1 (3) + 0.34 (1) + 5.57 (20)	0.5 + 0.12 +

Munda), Karma Munda (s/o Sukhu Munda)			Lapung Block		1.74 (30 + 0.1 (3) = <b>4.84</b>	+ 0.38 (3) + 1.11 (2) + 0.45 (3) = <b>9.95</b>	0.02 + 0.12 + 0.05 = <b>0.81</b>
Lebre Munda (s/o Tudu Munda)	Burababa, Ongababa, Somra Munda, Etwa Munda etc.	Munda - Kacchap	Kakaria village, Lapung Block	Tenant - ?	0.79 (2) + 0.41 (1) + 0.89 (3) + 0.11 (3) = <b>2.2</b>	0.08 (1) + 0.49 (2) + 2.47 (3) + 0.35 (2) + 1.96 (3) = <b>5.35</b>	0.04 + 0.01 + 0.06 = <b>0.11</b>
Karma Munda (s/o Jodhan Munda)		Munda - Birla	Dimba village, Lapung Block	Tenant - ?	0.81 (2) + 0.92 (3) = <b>1.73</b>	0.5 (1) + 1.91 (2) + 0.53 (2) = <b>2.94</b>	<b>0.2</b>
Tela Munda (s/o Torai Munda)		Munda - Birla	Sapkela village, Lapung Block	Tenant - ?	0.93 (1) + 3.01 (2) + 1.14 (3) = <b>5.08</b>	0.16 (1) + 2.26 (2) + 1.28 (3) = <b>3.7</b>	
Malar and Mahli Munda (s/o Gunga Munda)		Munda - Birla	Parwal, Lapung Block	Tenant - ?	0.33 (1) + 1.53 (2) + 0.07 (3) = <b>1.93</b>	0.05 (1) + 0.54 (2) + 0.23 (3) + 0.25 (1) + 0.07 (2) + 0.92 (3) = <b>2.06</b>	<b>0.05</b>
Lodhar Munda (s/o Dana Munda)		Munda - Safed Kuwa	Jariya village	Tenant - ?	0.3 (1) + 1.56 (1) + 2.11 (2) + 3.38 (3) + 0.86 (1) + 0.13 (2) = <b>8.34</b>	0.61 (1) + 3.99 (2) + 0.29 (3) + 0.62 (2) = <b>5.51</b>	0.01 + 0.15 + 0.05 + 0.09 + 0.07 + 0.49 = <b>0.86</b>
Makua, Begna, Lodhra Munda (s/o Budhwa Munda) and Rikua and Begna Munda (s/o Budhwa Munda) and Sukher Munda		Munda - Kachap	Kusum Toli, Lapung Block	Tenant - ?	1.09 (2) + 2.43 (1) + 0.06 (2) + 1.38 (3) = <b>4.96</b>	0.53 (3) + 0.09 (1) + 1.16 (2) + 0.98 (3) = <b>2.76</b>	0.02 + 0.09 = <b>0.11</b>

(s/o Dhanua Munda)							
Libu Munda	No descendants	Munda		Tenant - ?	2.07 (2) + 0.08 (3) = <b>2.15</b>	0.05 (1) + 1.41 (20) + 0.23 (3) = <b>1.69</b>	0.06 + 0.33 + 0.06 = <b>0.45</b>
Kariya Munda (s/o Birsa Munda)	No descendants	Munda		Tenant - ?	<b>0.6 (3)</b>	0.67 (2) + 0.23 (3) = <b>0.9</b>	
<i>Pahan</i>					1.5 (1) + 0.26 (2) = <b>1.73</b>		0.06 + 0.15 + 0.23 = <b>0.44</b>
<i>Paenbharra</i>					2.43 (2) + 0.15 (3) = <b>2.58</b>		
Bhutkhetta					<b>4.51 (2)</b>	<b>0.05 (1)</b>	
<i>Gauri and Indranath Maheto</i> <sup>17</sup>		Ahir	Jariya village, Bero Block	<i>Zamindar</i>	6.31 (1) + 5.74 (1) + 1.93 (2) + 3.56 (3) + 0.97 (1) + 4.47 (2) + 1.02 (3) + 0.65 (2) = <b>24.65</b>	2.34 (1) + 2.48 (1) + 7.09 (2) + 0.77 (1) + 0.48 (1) + 3.46 (2) + 1.26 (3) + 1.35 (2) = <b>19.23</b>	
<i>Kali Maheto</i>		Ahir	Jariya village, Bero Block	<i>Zamindar</i>	3.07 (2) + 0.97 (1) + 4.47 (2) + 1.02 (3) + 0.65 (2) = <b>10.18</b>	1.39 (2) + 2.53 (1) + 1.08 (2) + 0.15 (3) + 0.48 (1) + 3.46 (2) + 1.26 (3) + 1.35 (2) = <b>11.7</b>	<b>0.57</b>
<i>Devnath Maheto</i>		Ahir	Jariya Village, Bero Block	<i>Zamindar</i>		<b>0.04 (1)</b>	0.08 + 0.06 = <b>0.14</b>

<sup>17</sup> I have represented only the cultivated lands here and therefore have not included the *ghairmazrua* lands (land without occupancy rights) and forests. These were later taken over by the government).

**Figure 3: Land ownership in Tapu in 1992**

Based on EIRFP data.<sup>18</sup>

Household <sup>19</sup> (name of person given if referred to in thesis)	Land in acres					
	total	<i>doin</i>	medium	<i>tanr</i>	<i>bari</i>	Irrigated
Yadav	1.08	0.43	0	0.6	0.05	0
Yadav	1.08	0.45	0.25	0.28	0.1	0
Yadav	1.08	0.5	0	0.51	0.07	0.3
Ramesh Yadav	1.08	0.43	0	0.55	0.1	0.56
Yadav	1.08	0.43	0	0.55	0.1	0.7
Gope	0.7	0.25	0	0.4	0.05	0.5
Manoj Odhar	2.29	0.5	0.75	1	0.04	0.8
Odhar	2.29	0.5	0.75	1	0.04	0.8
Odhar	2.29	0.75	0.5	1	0.04	0.8
Odhar	2.29	0.75	0.5	1	0.04	0.8
Adhikari	2.78	0.8	0.93	1	0.05	2
Adhikari	2.78	0.8	0.93	1	0.05	1
Keshulal Odhar	3.86	1.71	1	1	0.15	1
Odhar	3.78	1.68	1	1	0.1	1
Darshan Odhar	3.33	1	1	1	0.33	1.2
Odhar	3.17	1.12	1	1	0.05	0
Popat Odhar	3.17	1.1	1	1	0.07	0.5

<sup>18</sup> Between March and October 2001, I conducted a brief questionnaire survey of every household of the village. One of the purposes of the survey was to find out how much, and which, land people owned. Although people could point out what bits of land they owned, what and how much they produce on it each year, these land related questions were particularly unsuccessful as most could not quantify their land holdings. I have thus very little reliable quantitative data on land holding size and, therefore, use the data produced by the EIRFP working in the village for an indication of how much land people owned. I suspect that this data is based on the land records of more recent government surveys held in the houses of Darshan and his family. I had been told of the existence of such records by many people in the village but when I asked the concerned people myself, was continually denied their existence.

<sup>19</sup> I have included households who have their own land and therefore have not included households that have a separate cooking hearth but still share land with the parental household.

Odhar	3.17	1	1.1	1	0.07	0.5
Odhar	9.65	3	3	3	0.65	0
Gope	3.0	1	1.5	0	0.5	0.3
Gope	2.03	0.66	0.75	0.2	0.42	0.3
Gope	2.03	0.66	0.75	0.2	0.42	0.3
Gope	2.03	0.66	0.75	0.2	0.42	0.3
Shiv Gope's father	6	3	1.5	1	0.5	3
Gope	1.26	0.55	0.55	0.1	0.06	0
Pramanik	0.75	0.32	0.38	0	0.05	0.75
Pramanik	0.6	0.25	0.31	0	0.04	1
Pramanik	0.15	0.07	0.08	0	0	0
Jubu Badaik's father	2.39	0.75	1.25	0.33	0.06	0
Badaik	0.33	0.15	0.11	0.05	0.02	0.3
Badaik	0.33	0.15	0.11	0.05	0.02	0
Badaik	0.36	0.15	0.11	0.05	0.05	0
Badaik	2.05	0.49	1.5	0	0.06	0
Badaik	3.51	1.5	1.25	0.72	0.04	1
Badaik	2.07	1	0.6	0.4	0.07	0
Lohra	0.2	0	0	0.2	0	0
Lohra	0.2	0	0	0.2	0	0
Lohra	0.2	0	0	0.2	0	0
Lohra	0.2	0	0	0.2	0	0
Maheli	0.32	0.15	0.15	0	0.02	0.2
Maheli	0.32	0.2	0.1	0	0.02	0.06
Maheli	0.08	0.06	0	0	0.02	0
Maheli	0.08	0.06	0	0	0.02	0
Maheli	0.08	0.06	0	0	0.02	0
Maheli	1.71	1.02	0.65	0	0.04	0.2
Wahib Khan	0.45	0.2	0.23	0	0.02	0.5
Umran Khan	0.45	0.2	0.23	0	0.02	0.25
Khatoum	0.7	0.3	0.38	0	0.02	0.2
Khan	0.7	0.3	0.38	0	0.02	0.1
Khan	0.7	0.3	0.38	0	0.02	0.2
Khan	0.7	0.3	0.38	0	0.02	0.1
Bhagat	2.22	0.8	0.7	0.65	0.07	0.5
Bhagat	2.22	0.8	0.7	0.65	0.07	0.25



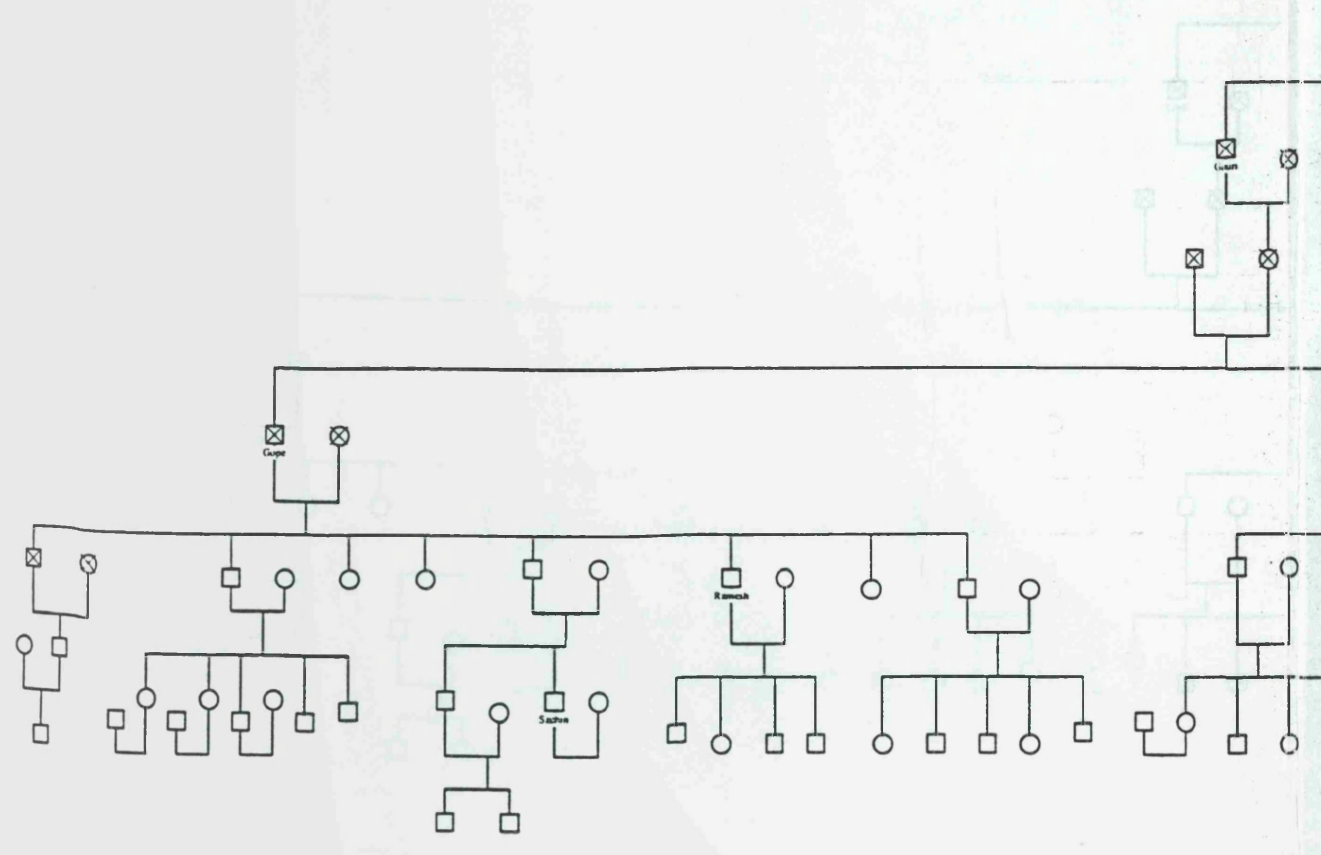
Bhagat	2.22	0.8	0.7	0.65	0.07	0
Bhagat	2.22	0.8	0.7	0.65	0.07	0.5
Oraon	3.48	1	1	1	0.48	1
Oraon	2.00	1	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.5
Munda	0.57	0.3	0.25	0	0.02	0
Munda	0.57	0.3	0.25	0	0.02	0
Munda	1.4	0.55	0.4	0.4	0.05	0
Munda	1.07	0.35	0.4	0.3	0.02	0
Munda	2.28	0.8	0.68	0.75	0.05	1
Munda	1.13	0.39	0.36	0.35	0.03	0
Munda	5.16	2	1.26	1.8	0.1	0
Munda	0.37	0.15	0.2	0	0.02	0.6
Munda	0.84	0.35	0.45	0	0.04	0
Minktu Munda	0.84	0.35	0.45	0	0.04	0.05
Munda	0.96	0.5	0.43	0	0.03	0
Munda	0.57	0.25	0.2	0.1	0.02	0.3
Munda	0.57	0.23	0.2	0.1	0.04	0.2
Munda	1.16	0.4	0.51	0.2	0.05	0
Munda	2.62	1	0.82	0.75	0.05	1
Munda	2.62	1	0.82	0.75	0.05	1
Somra Munda	0.71	0.2	0.2	0.29	0.02	0
Budhwa Munda	0.71	0.2	0.2	0.29	0.02	0
Onga Munda	2.16	0.8	0.56	0.75	0.05	0
Etwa Munda	2.16	0.8	0.56	0.75	0.05	0.5
Munda	0.76	0.33	0.4	0	0.03	0
Munda	0.76	0.33	0.4	0	0.03	0
Munda	1.63	0.45	0.65	0.48	0.05	0
Munda	1.73	0.45	0.65	0.48	0.15	1
Munda	0.75	0.4	0.33	0	0.02	0
Munda	0.28	0.16	0.2	0	0.02	0
Munda	0.28	0.16	0.2	0	0.02	0
Munda	2.88	0.73	0.8	0.85	0.05	0
Munda	2.88	0.73	0.8	0.85	0.05	0.6
Munda	2.43	0.85	0.73	0.8	0.05	0
Munda	2.43	0.85	0.73	0.8	0.05	0
Munda	3.7	0.65	0.65 + 0.6	0.5 +	0.05 +	0.5 + 0

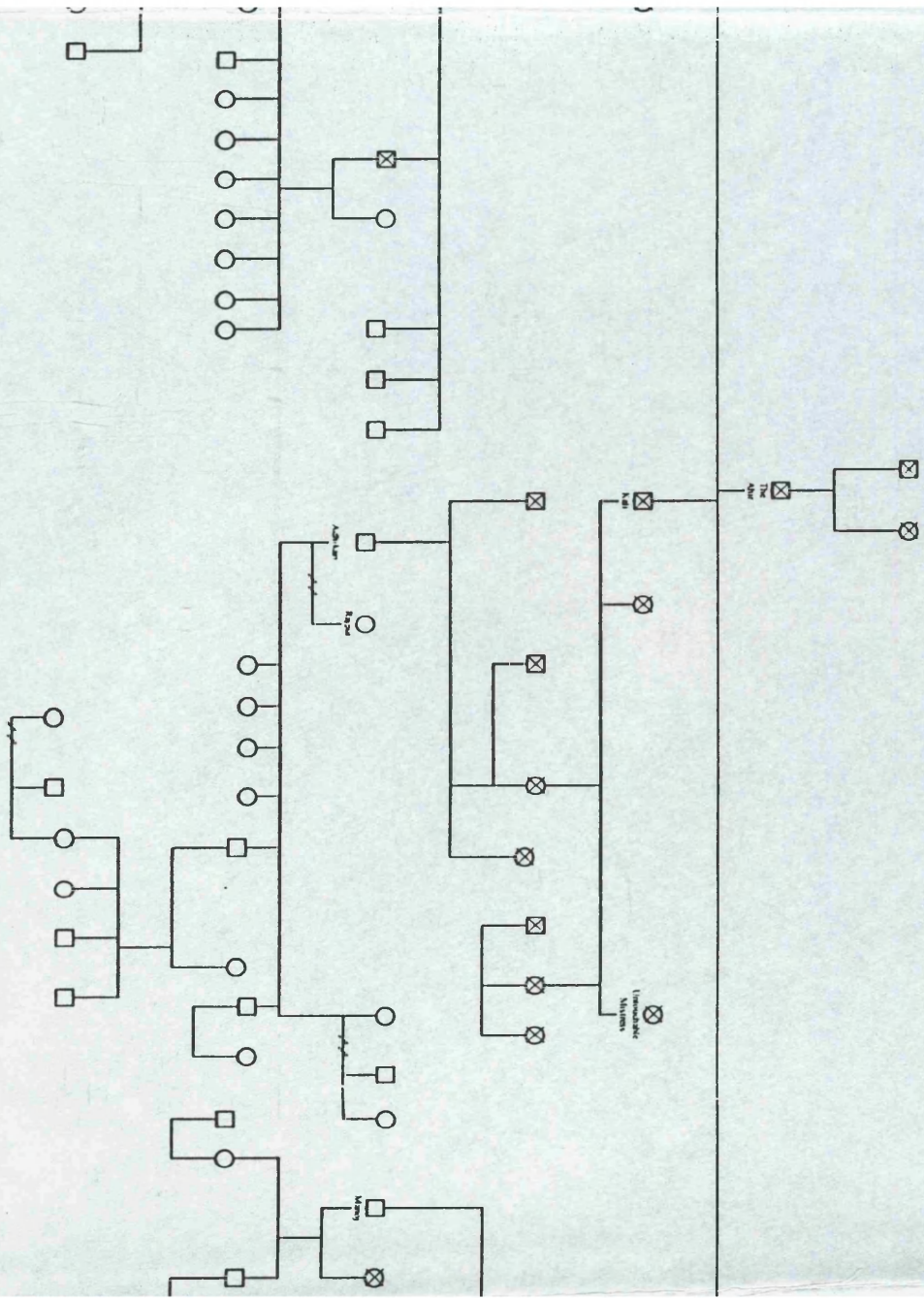
		+0.65		0.5	0.1	
Charka Munda	9.37	3.22	3	3	0.15	1
Munda	4.76	1.4	2.26	1	0.1	0.5
Munda	0.76	0.33	0.4	0	0.03	0
Munda	2.43	0.73	0.8	0.85	0.05	0.08
Munda	2.43	0.8	0.85	0.73	0.05	0
Munda	0.71	0.2	0.2	0.29	0.02	0
Munda	1.13	0.39	0.35	0.35	0.04	0

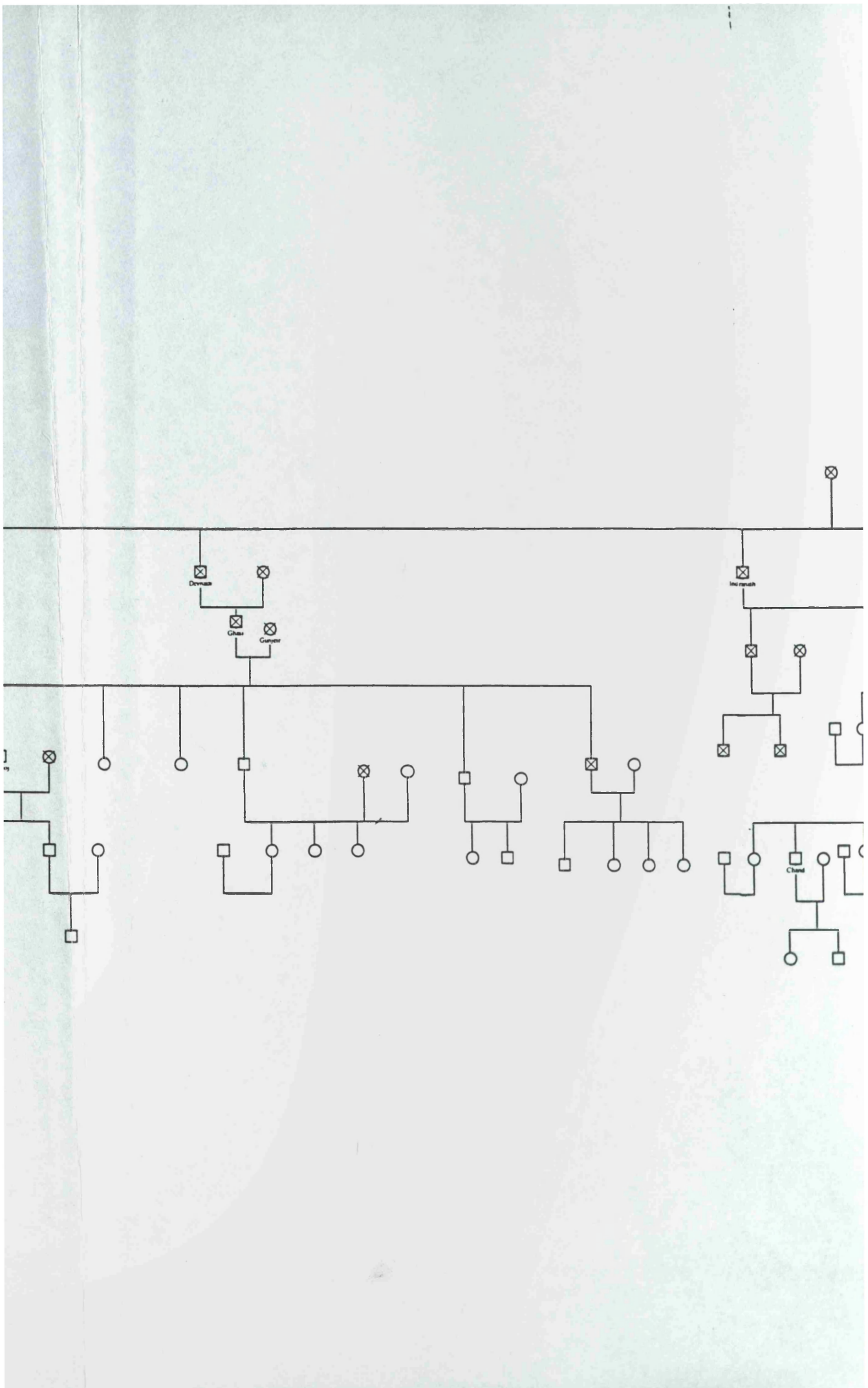
**Figure 4: Tribal and Hindu festivals in Tapu**

Lunar Month	Month	Festival	Mainly Tribal?	Mainly Hindu?	Both Tribal and Hindu?	Chanda by Pahan Pujar?	Village Feast by Pahan Pujar?
<i>Kartik</i>	Oct-Nov	<i>Devthan</i>		√		√	
		<i>Dair-Lagana Puja</i>			√		
<i>Aghan</i>	Nov-Dec	<i>Khalihani Puja</i>	√				√
		<i>Bhutkheta</i>	√				
		<i>Harbori</i>	√				
<i>Pus</i>	Dec-Jan						
<i>Mag</i>	Jan-Feb	<i>Saraswati Puja</i>		√			
		<i>Chagri-Khaek</i>	√				
<i>Fagun</i>	Feb-Mar	<i>Holi</i>		√			
		<i>Fagua</i>	√				
<i>Cheith</i>	Mar-Apr	<i>Bisu Sirkar</i>	√				
		<i>Sarhul</i>	√				√
		<i>Ramnumi</i>		√		√	
<i>Besak</i>	Apr-May	<i>Kudi-udraik</i>	√				
<i>Jeth</i>	May-Jun	<i>Parha Jatra</i>	√			√	
<i>Asar</i>	Jun-Jul	Hari-hari	√				
<i>Sawan</i>	Jul-Aug	<i>Savan-Satmi</i>		√		√	
<i>Bhadon</i>	Aug-Sept	<i>Kadoletta</i>	√				
		<i>Karma</i>			√		√
		<i>Tij</i>		√			
<i>Ashwin</i>	Sept-Oct	<i>Jitia</i>		√			
		<i>Dasera</i>		√			

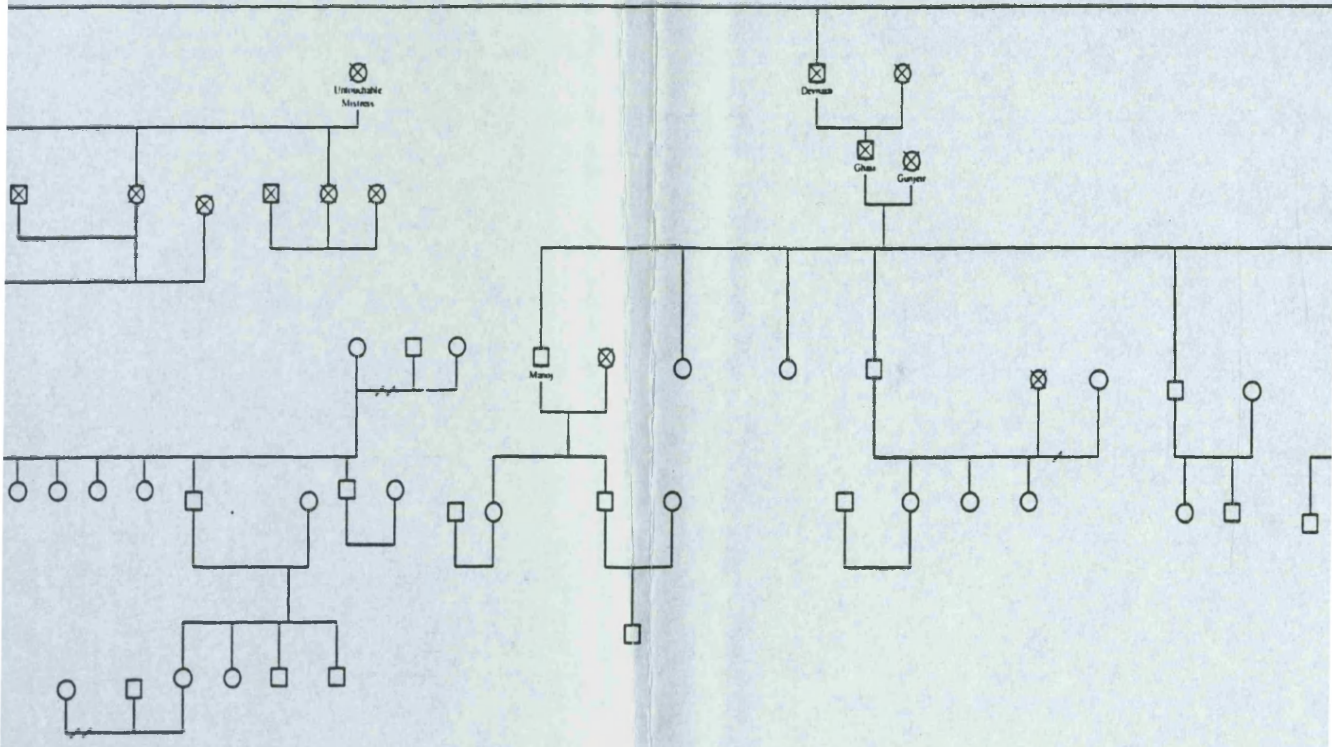
Lineage of ... descendants













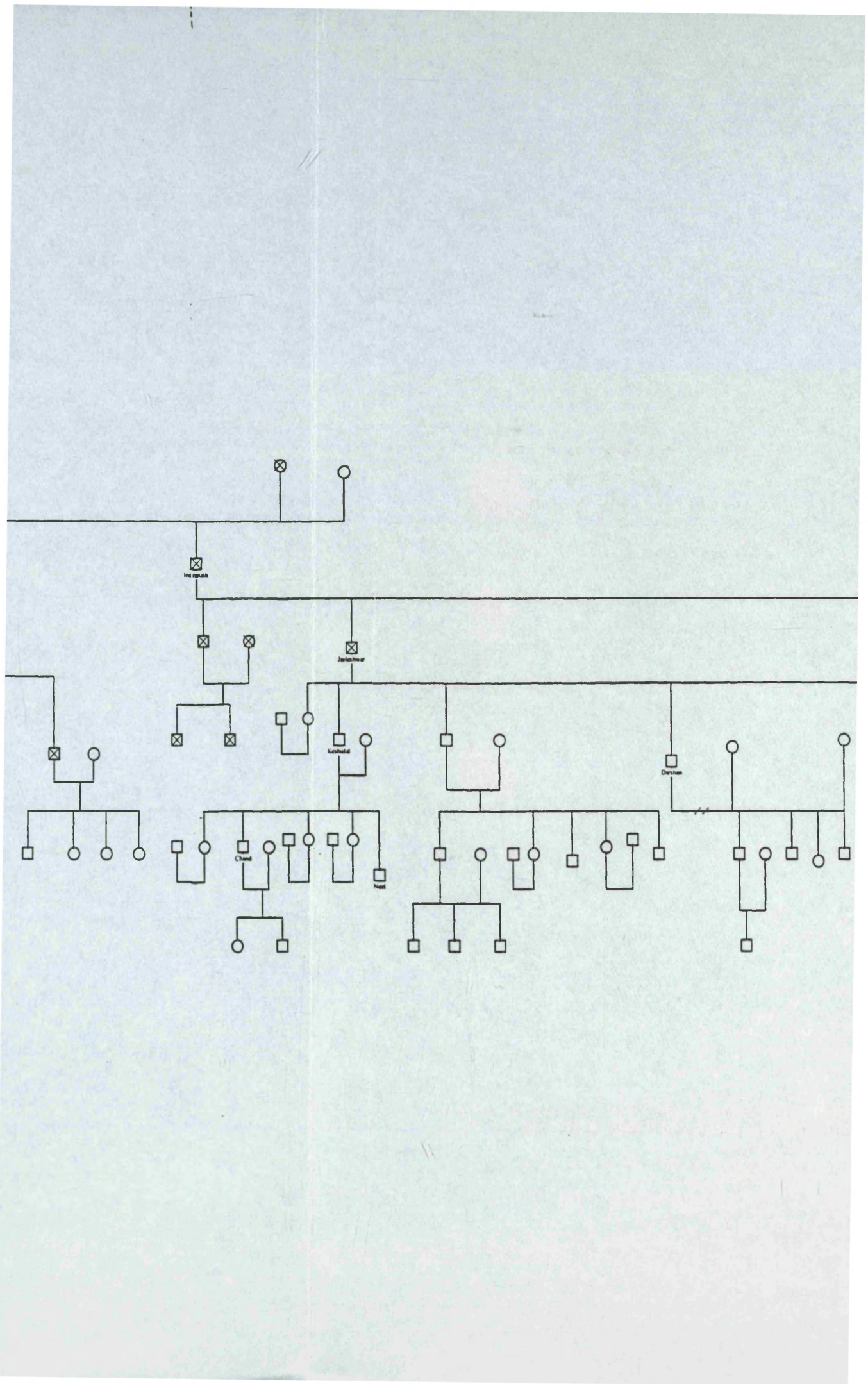




Figure 5: Genealogy of zamindar descendants

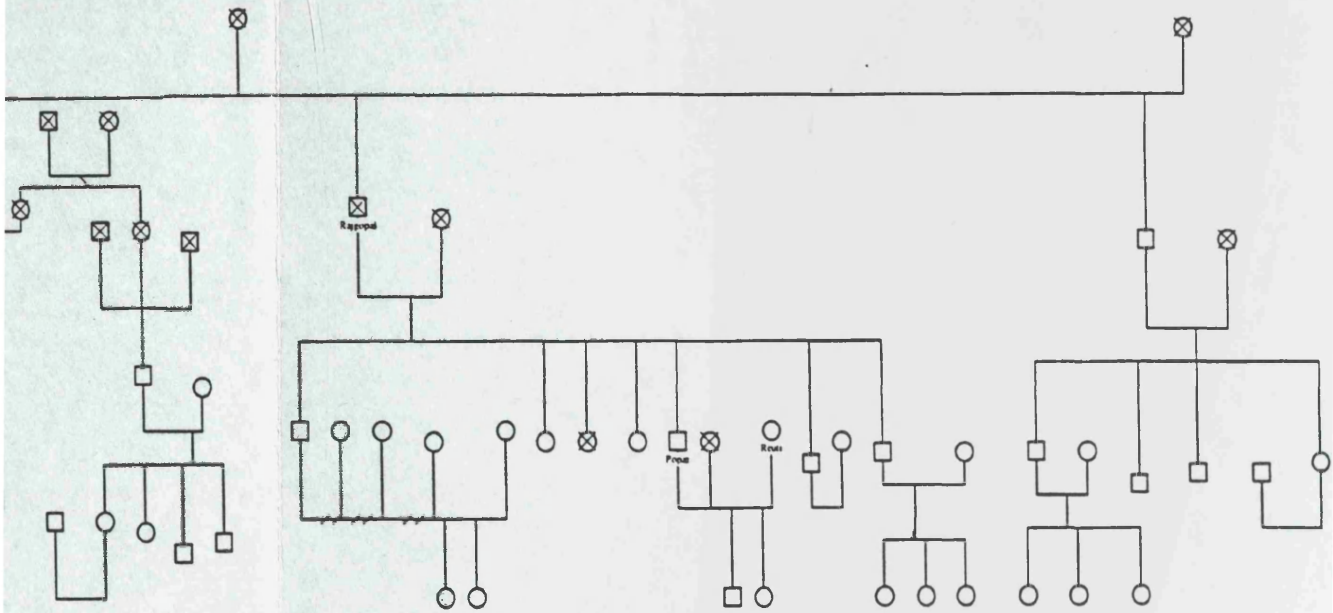




Plate 1: Chasing elephants. Photograph by Kedar Maheto.



Plate 2: One of the three holes in Wahib's house resulting from elephant attack.  
14 December 200. Photograph by author.





Plate 3: Forest Guards and villagers at the elephant destruction meeting in Ber Toli. 22 December 2000. Photograph by author.

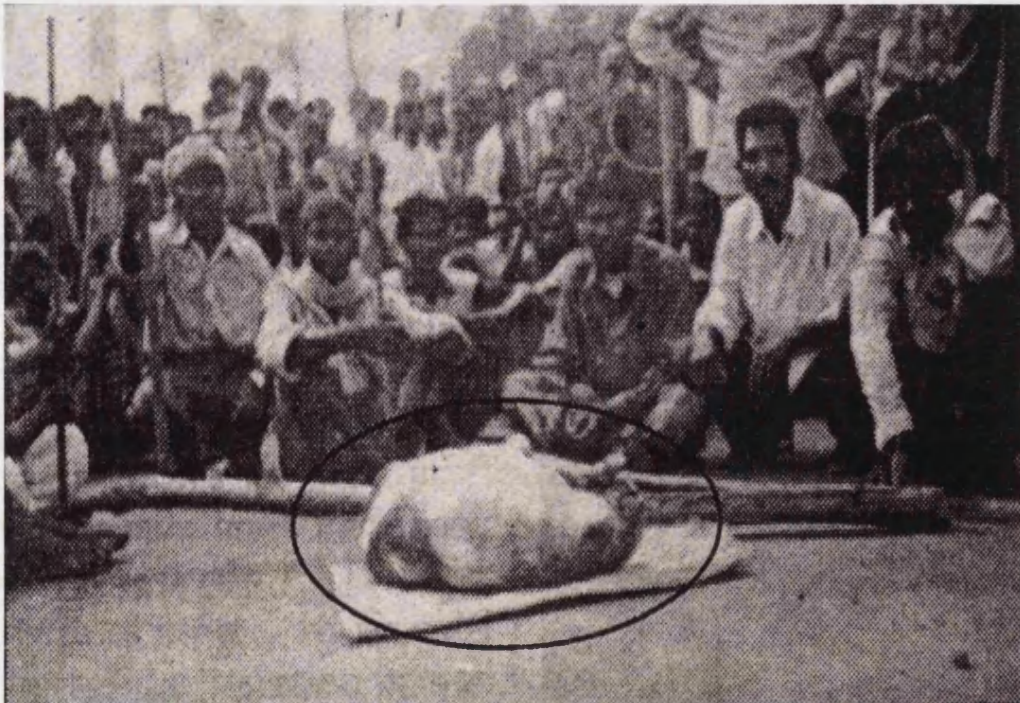


Plate 4: The white bundle of the decapitated Oroan woman who was stamped by an elephant in the road blockade in Bero. The corpse is surrounded by the Jamtoli villagers. 4 October 2001. Photograph by Kedar Maheto for *Prabhat Khabar*.





Plate 5: Tapu village. Photograph by author.



Plate 6: Track between two hamlets of Tapu village. Photograph by author.





Plate 7: *Pahan* and *paenbharra* in Tapu offering a sacrifice of chickens to the spirits at the *Khalihani festival*. Photograph by author.



Plate 8: Preparation of *hadia*, rice beer, at the (s)election of the *pahan* and *paenbharra* in Tapu. Photograph by author.



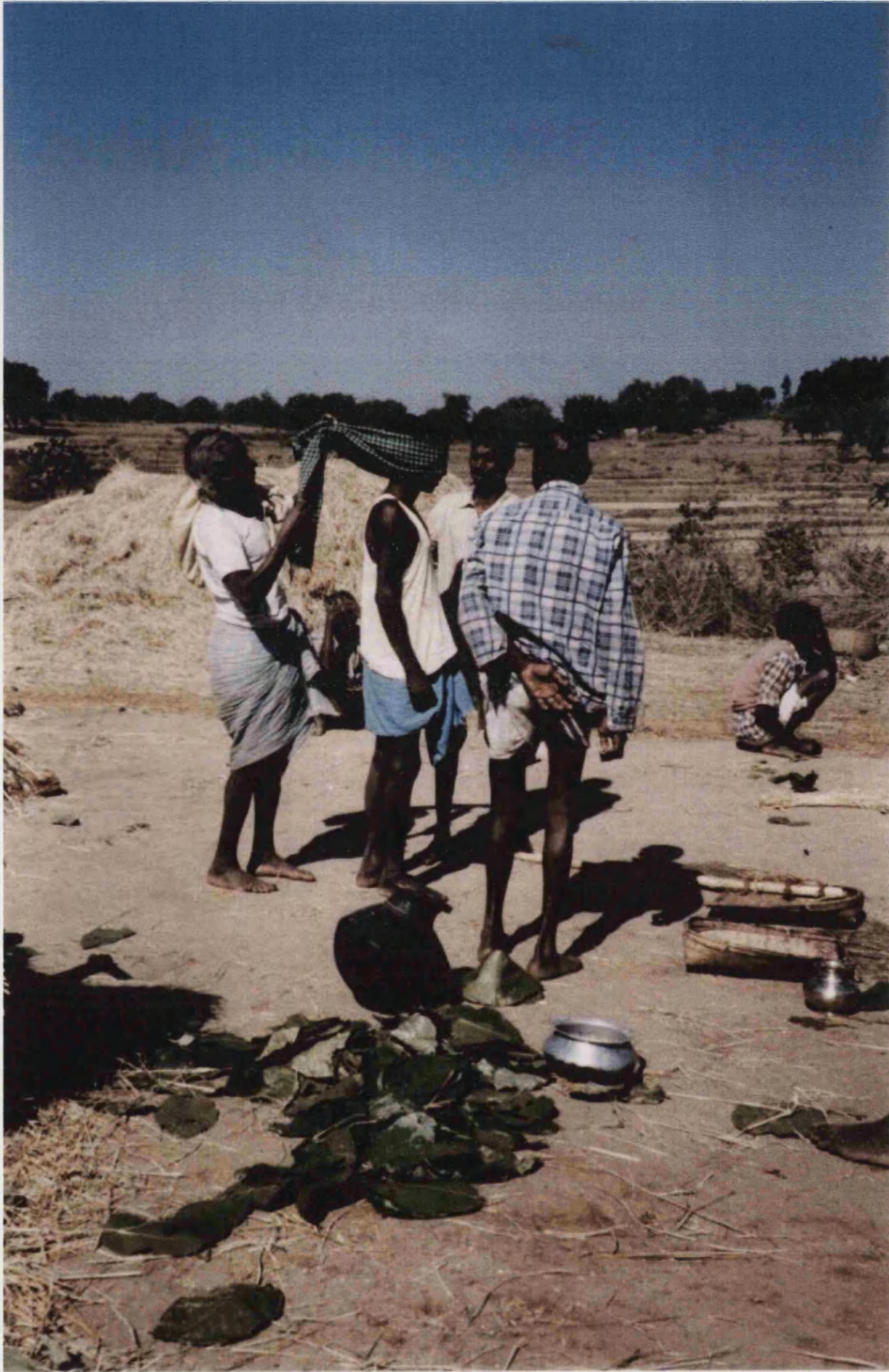


Plate 9: Blindfolding of the man who is to be possessed by the spirit to (s)elect the *pahan* and *paenbharra* in Tapu. Photograph by author.





Plate 10: The man and winnowing basket, who are possessed by the spirit, moving from the fields to the houses to (s)elect the *pahan* and *paenbharra* in Tapu. Photograph by author.



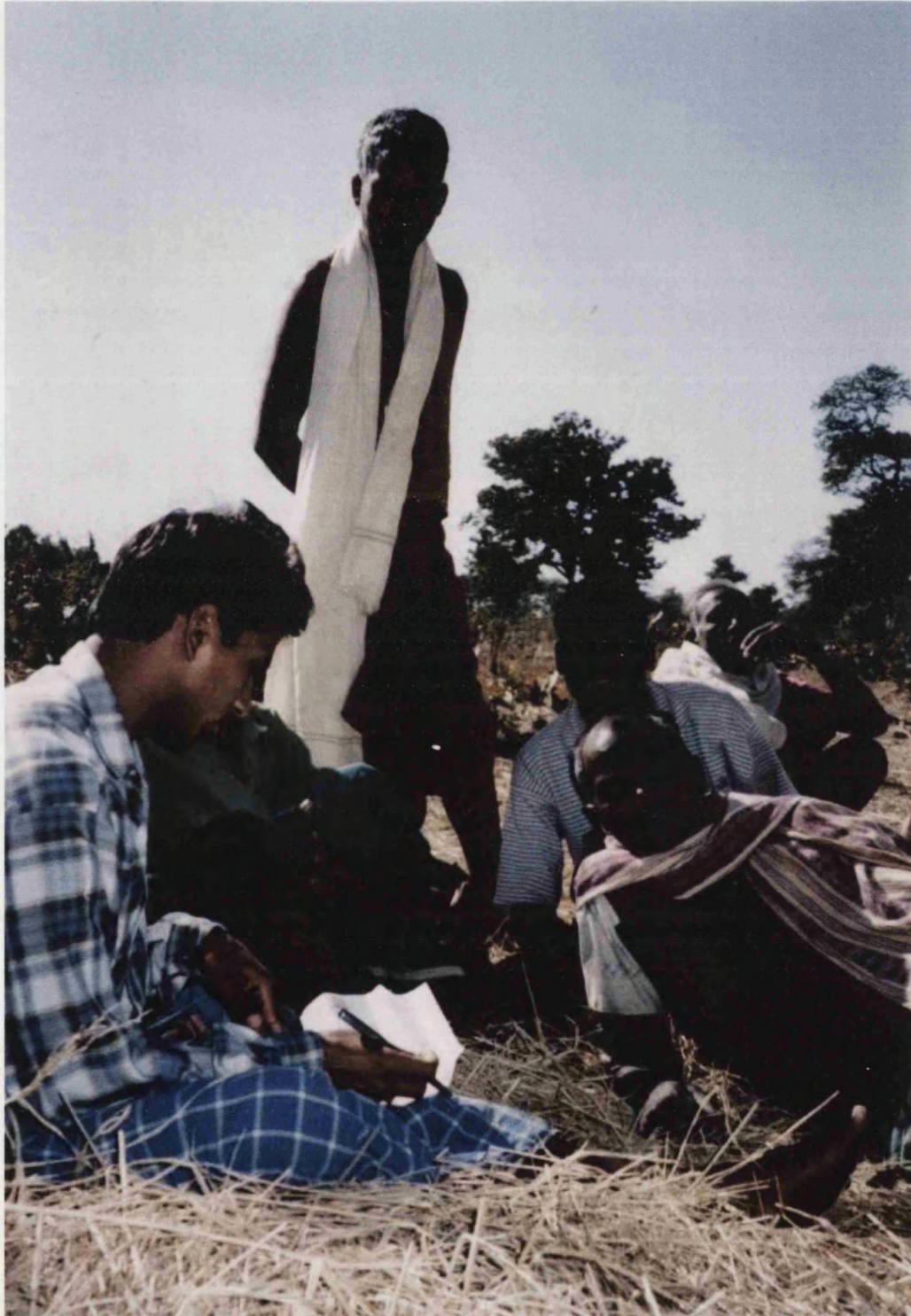


Plate 11: Neel and Darshan Odhar at the (s)election of the *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries in Tapu. Photograph by author.



## Chapter 2: Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power: The Relationship Between the Tenants and the *Zamindars*

At the end of the annual harvest in *Aghan*, the lunar month around November to December, a *Khalihani* festival is held in all the villages in the area around Tapu. At this festival, the spirits of the village are thanked for the year's harvest. They are asked to ensure that there is enough *dhan* (husked rice) in every house of the village for the coming year. The *pahan*,<sup>20</sup> the spiritual head of the village, and the *paenbharra* (literally meaning water carrier),<sup>21</sup> his assistant, offer sacrifices to the spirits and prepare a feast in the open fields to which the entire village is welcome (Plate 7). They cook the rice that is harvested from the *doin* (the lowland) that is given to them for the three-year period of their duties.

Once every three years in Tapu, on the day after the annual *Khalihani* feast, two events take place. The first is the (s)election of the new *pahan* and the new *paenbharra*. The second is the selection of the eleven men who are to be given *bhuthkhetta* land (literally meaning spirit-land) for the next three year period. When I witnessed these events in Tapu, I was left puzzled about why, despite the abolition of *zamindari* in the 1950s, the Mundas, the descendants of tenants, appeared in certain contexts to defer to the Hindu Odhars or Yadavs, who are the descendants of the village landlords or *zamindars*. This chapter is an attempt to understand these events.

I first analyse the historical development of the relationship between the *zamindars* and their tenants. Following Cohn (1987), I argue that, from the tenant point of view, the decline of the *zamindars* was evident in the period before the abolition of *zamindars* and furthered after abolition not because of legal reform, but because of the declining material wealth of the *zamindars*. I argue that some of the men from the ex-*zamindar* lineage attempt to maintain their patronage status to the Mundas by accessing resources

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<sup>20</sup> The *pahan* is also known in some areas as the *baiga* or *naegas* (in *Kurukh* language).

<sup>21</sup> The *paenbharra* is also known in some areas, and sometimes in Tapu as well, as the *pujar*.

from, and maintaining their material wealth through, the modern state. However, I point out that most Mundas are not solely dependent on the *ex-zamindars* for their livelihoods and that there is significant conflict and contradiction in the way Mundas think of the *zamindars* as patrons. As such, understanding Munda deference to the *ex-zamindars* in terms of a simple patron-client model is shown to be insufficient. I follow Gilsenan (1977) to argue that conceiving these relationships as simply ‘patron-client relations’ masks the wider understandings and social practices in which they are embedded and mystifies the complex linkages between understandings and the social processes in which they are reproduced.

The second part of this chapter proposes that to understand the continuing power of the *zamindar* descendants, as well as the particular contexts in which their power is reproduced, it is essential to understand the interrelated but differing views of spiritual authority and temporal power held by the *zamindar* descendants and the tribal peasants. I argue that in the Munda world-view all aspects of life should be legitimized by the world of spirits and those aspects that are not legitimized by the spirits are potentially alien and dangerous. Spirits have to be propitiated and Mundas believe that only they have the power to propitiate the strongest spirits. I argue that the Hinduised *zamindars* see control of such spirits as mere exorcism, and that from their point of view the sacred sphere is officiated over by the Brahmin priest. However, following a comparable argument made by Schnepel (1995), I propose that the *zamindars* realize that their continuing patronage status is dependent on appearing to value and support the Munda spiritual view. In turn, the Mundas accept such patronage as they understand it to have been historically legitimized by their world of spirits.

In evaluating this historical evolution of the relationship between the *zamindar* descendants (who form the majority of ‘the political elite’) and the tenant descendants (who I call ‘the tribal peasants’), as well as their related understandings of spiritual authority and temporal power, this chapter provides the analytical basis that frames the subsequent two chapters.

## The Events

On 8th December 2000, at about 10.00am, I walked with Onga Munda to the periphery of the Tapu fields near Ber Patra forest where the *khalihans* (flat areas to pound husked rice grains from the stalk) had been cleared and smoothed with cow-dung. This was the place where we had enjoyed the *Khalihani* feast the night before and where the (s)election of the new *pahan* and the *paenbharra* was about to begin.

Onga Munda told me that the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* offer sacrifices to the spirits of the village at particular times in the year. This was an essential task to ensure that all the spirits were kept happy, and, as such, that people could live peacefully in Tapu. If the *pahan* and *paenbharra* failed, there would be droughts, floods, earthquakes and disease. Crops, cattle and people would die. I understood that the role of the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* was to propitiate the village spirits to maintain an agreeable balance between the village and the supernatural world.

When we reached the clearing some men were seated around a few aluminum and clay pots of *hadia* (rice beer) (Plate 8). There were about ten middle and old-aged Munda men, one Lohra and one Badaik. I followed Onga Munda and mimicked his actions. I greeted each man individually by touching my closed hands with theirs. I sat down on a pile of hay near them and a young Munda man came to give me a *sal* leaf cup. He offered me some *hadia*. Everyone was still apparently very drunk from the *Khalihani* feast the night before. Onga Munda dropped a few drops of *hadia* onto the ground for his ancestral spirits before taking a sip. As he drank he complained, 'these days you young boys are not making good *hadia*. There is too much water. It is not pure.' He then cursed the young man and said, 'there will soon be a time when you people won't even know what *hadia* is!'

In fact, as I waited in anticipation for the ceremonies to begin, most of the conversations seemed to be about drinking and being drunk. One man said to another, '*Itna pibe to*

*mute nahi parbe*’ (If you drink so much you won’t be able to pee). Someone interrupted, ‘*Aur pibe to mute kaha nahi? Uthke --- niklai nahi parbe, pante me mutai jabe*’ (If he drinks more, he won’t be able to pee? Not only that, he won’t be able to remove his [penis]. He will pee in his pants). Yet another man replied, ‘*Pante me mutabe to ka, jara ker din hai, garam rakhtau*’ (So what if he pees in his pants? It’s winter: the pee will keep him warm).

In the midst of these drunken conversations, somebody was attaching a winnowing basket<sup>22</sup> to a bamboo pole. Old Onga Munda came to my side. He said I should get my machine out and get it ready to take some photos. I would need them for my research. I asked him what we were waiting for. He told me that the present *pahan* had gone to look for the man with the *halka chaya* (the light shadow) in the neighboring village. He told me that this man would hold the winnowing basket and as a spirit came to possess the basket it would in turn possess the man. He said, ‘the basket will start shaking and moving on its own, as though it has some secret force. You will see too that the man will start shaking and following the basket. This means that the spirit has entered them. She (the spirit) will direct them to the houses of the people she wishes to make the new *pahan* and the *paenbharra*. When she is happy, she will leave the man and the basket and settle in the new house. The first time she does this, it will be the house of the new *pahan*. The second time she does this, it will be the house of the new *paenbharra*.’

The *pahan*, who had left for the next village an hour before, returned unsuccessful in his attempts to find the man reputed to have a light shadow. Someone said that another man who had married a girl from the village also had the reputation of having a light shadow and was visiting his in-laws. The *pahan* went to look for him but came back half an hour later to report that he had left to take his in-law’s cattle to graze in the forest. Most of the

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<sup>22</sup> Fuller has noted that winnowing baskets or fans used to separate grain from chaff are symbols of separation in general and in particular of the separation of polluting and inauspicious elements that can be cast away (Fuller, 1992: 193). As it will become clear, in this chapter I am not concerned with a detailed analysis of the symbolisms of the ritual but focus more on how and why the social relations at the ritual signify the development of broader social relations in the village.

men in the gathering now seemed to be getting slightly concerned. There was talk of whether to shift the (s)election to the following day so that they could get the right person from the next village. Someone, however, remembered that a man from Tapu had just recently become a *bhagat* (spirit medium) and was said to have the required light shadow. When someone else protested that he was probably not suitable, he was quieted by the others: 'if we have finally found someone, then let it be.'

This young *bhagat* was brought to the *khalihans*. He was blindfolded and the *pahan* began to examine him (Plate 9). The *pahan* threw the *arwa* rice (raw and husked)<sup>23</sup> at him and chanted, 'East, West, North, South. In my whole area, in your whole area, *Sarna Mai*, calculate my responsibility and let's go see who will take responsibility'. The winnowing basket held at the end of the bamboo pole did indeed start moving and the man began to shiver. He walked off towards the main hamlet. The rest of us followed (Plate 10).

The man stopped shivering in the very first house that he entered, the house of an old Munda and his son. The old man became the new *pahan*. Blindfolded again in this house, the *bhagat* was once more possessed. He began walking towards Onga Munda's house. Onga, who had at some point become hungry, had by then left the group. As we approached the courtyard he was peacefully having his *kalwa* (lunch-time rice) outside his house. While he continued eating, inside his house he was declared the new *paenbhaara*.

By the time the crowd reached the main hamlet, Neel Odhar and his uncle Darshan had joined the gang. They were the descendants of the *zamindar* of the village. As we returned to the *khalihans* in the midst of the Tapu fields for the next selection, the Munda men told me that the *ex-zamindars* choose the eleven *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries at their discretion. Only Munda men were ever chosen. I asked what the *bhutkhetta* men

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<sup>23</sup> *Arwa* rice is different to the more commonly eaten *usna* rice which is first boiled, then husked and then reboiled before eating.

do. I was told that they helped the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*. 'Helped them in doing what?' I asked. 'In *gau ka kam* (village work),' was the consistent reply.

I asked over and over again what this '*gau ka kam*' meant, and eventually got a clearer picture. Together with the *bhutkhetta* men, the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* had other functions too. They were to organize the erection of *mandaps* (stages) for all weddings in Tapu. This involves axing trees, carrying them from the forest to the *mandap* site and then digging the ground in which the tree-poles are to be erected. At Munda weddings the *pahan* and *paenbharra* were also to carry out the wedding ceremonies. At marriages of the *ex-zamindar*, a Brahmin priest was brought in from another village to conduct the rituals. Similarly, whilst the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* men would collect firewood for the Hindu funeral pyres, those required by the *ex-zamindars*, Brahmin priests conducted the Hindu funeral rituals. Most Mundas of course do not burn their dead, but bury them instead, and never require Brahmin priests. The *pahan* and *paenbharra* were also to announce village meetings called by the *ex-zamindars*, announce the harvesting of the *ex-zamindar* fields, and search for labour for the *ex-zamindars*. The *pahan* and *paenbharra* were also to collect *chanda* (donations) from each household for expenses incurred in village festivals. Of note here is that most of these festivals are Hindu, which Mundas rarely choose to attend. Lastly, the *pahan* and *paenbharra* were also to bring mud for the rebuilding and wall plastering of the 'village' temple. This is the Hindu temple to Durga built by Darshan's mother and is not used by the Mundas. All of these duties are referred to by the term, '*gau ka kam*'.

To fulfill these duties, the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* are assigned particular plots of land to cultivate (of between 1 to 2.5 acres).<sup>24</sup> The amount of rice they grow in these

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<sup>24</sup> As the Mundas are rarely able to quantify the land they cultivate and I was never able to get more official figures from the *ex-zamindar* family who hold the current village land records, I was not able to quantify the exact amount of land given to the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*. In theory it should be the same as that which is signified in the 1932 land records of the village (See Figure 2). These records indicate that 1.73 acres are reserved for the *pahan* (of which 1.5 acres is the best lowland and 0.26 acres is 2<sup>nd</sup> degree lowland). In addition there is 0.4 acres of upland for the *pahan*. The land records also suggest that 2.55

fields will depend on their luck, itself an indication of the favour in which they are held by the spirits. In 1999 the *paenbharra* harvested 25 *oriyas* (40 kilograms is one *oriya*) of *dhan*, the year before 40 *oriyas*, and the year before that 50 *oriyas*. Onga Munda told me that no one had ever grown more than 75 *oriyas* a year, except for his nephew who was *paenbharra* in 1988. From the *dhan*, the *pahan* and *paenbharra* are to feed the entire village three times a year, at *Khalihani*, *Sarhul* and *Karma*. For each feast, the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* must produce about 60 kilograms of rice and about ten kilograms of *dal* (lentils). Drink is provided by the whole village – a pot of *hadia* from each house. After the feasts, the two functionaries are free to keep the remainder of the crop they grow on the *pahan* and *paenbharra* land.

The *bhutkhetta* men also benefit from *bhutkhetta* lands that are scattered across the village and range in both quality and size – the largest of which is about 0.5 acres. From this land they are expected to feed the village just once in three years, at the end of their tenure, for which each *bhutkhetta* man brings about ten kilograms of rice, some *dal* and some vegetables. For their land, *bhutkhetta* men pay a small tax to Darshan (the *zamindar* descendant) and his family.

When the crowd arrived at the *khalihans* for the *bhutkhetta* selection, everyone sat dispersed around Darshan. The group had now grown to also include people who had returned from the fields and forest to rest before their afternoon work. I realized that it was not going to be a quick announcement of the beneficiaries, and waited to hear the wisdom of Darshan and his family.

Darshan said that before the *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries were chosen, the dispute between the Mahelis and the Mundas, that had occurred the night before at the *Khalihani* festival, would have to be resolved. The Mahelis, like the Mundas, are classified as Scheduled Tribes by the government. In Tapu, however, all the villagers including the Mundas, regard the Mahelis as the village untouchables, the lowest in the *jati* hierarchy. I had

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acres are reserved for the *paenbharra*, of which 2.42 acres is second-degree lowland and 0.15 acres is third degree lowland.

been at the festival the night before and remembered what had happened. Old Charka Munda, who was drunk, had looked at the Maheli children and commented loudly to Baiju Munda's mother, 'so many children to feed!' Pandra Maheli's wife had overheard. Insulted, she had encouraged all the Mahelis to leave the gathering without eating.

By the time Darshan brought this up, Charka had already apologized to the Maheli woman, saying that he had been very drunk and that, as such, he ought to be forgiven. Darshan, however, keen to intervene, told the Mundas in an authoritative manner, 'you have to treat your guests well and you have to treat them first. You ought to ask them if they want their food *'sidha'* (literally meaning straight but here implying 'raw') or if they would like it cooked. If the latter, you should serve them first and eat your portion last.' With that he turned to the Mahelis, 'and you should not mind too much what old Charka says. You know he doesn't mean it. He is in the habit of making taunting comments, starting a fight, and then walking away to let other people clear up the mess.'

Darshan then changed his tune, from authoritarian-diplomatic to an authoritative ceremonial tone. It was time to choose the next group of *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries. Neel, Darshan's nephew, had a list from the previous years and was ready to note those chosen this year (Plate 11). Darshan, however, had a few more words to say before the names were announced. He shouted, 'last period's beneficiaries have been so disappointing that this year everyone has to pay attention to some ground rules first.' He continued, 'You have to follow the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*. If they say bring mud, it is your duty to bring it. So far who has brought *me* any mud? Only three people. You are all so ungrateful. There are after all only a few things to be done in the year. Moreover, whenever you work you are rewarded with *hadia* and *bhat* (cooked rice). It is not as though you are doing it for free. This year I am making two new rules. If you do not do as the *pahan* and *paenbharra* tell you to, we will remove your land from you. If you do as you are told, you could get the land again three years later.'

By now two of Neel's more distant uncles had also arrived and the four sat down to decide who would get which bit of land. Neel's other uncle, Popat, who was actively



involved with the EIRFP and their targeted project in the village, took the opportunity to say his piece too: 'Give the land to people who will work. If you don't work, I will have no sympathy for you. Even if you are dying of thirst I will not offer you a drop of water. Do not give it to people who will give away the land in *sajha* (sharecropping). Do not give it to those who will leave the village and go to the brick kilns. Give the land to the *garib* (poor). Remove Charka from the list, he is a "landlord" [the English word was used here by which he literally meant someone who had a lot of land]. Don't favour anyone, be fair to all'. He seemed to make every effort to portray the process as happening along 'fair' and 'egalitarian' lines.

Neel scribbled on his piece of paper who might be chosen. Amongst those present, Neel, Darshan and Popat were the only ones who could read and write. Popat's brother, who had also come, was getting annoyed with all this writing as he felt it was prolonging the process, 'fifteen times you are cutting and rewriting. What is it that you are doing?' Eventually the eleven chosen men were announced by Darshan.

Darshan stated that, as the price of all things had increased, he was going to increase the tax. The *pahan* and *paenbharra*'s land tax was to go up from Rs12 to Rs20 for the three years. Some of the older Munda men protested. Onga Munda said, 'increase it, but don't make it so high straightaway.' With negotiation, Darshan compromised to Rs15 for the three years. In a similar way the *bhutkhetta* tax was increased from Rs6 to Rs10 for the three years. Neel collected the previous year's money. Of this Darshan gave Rs30 back to the old *pahan* and said, 'This is from my side. Go and buy drink for everybody.'

Neel, Darshan, Popat and his brother left. The Munda men carried on drinking. A little later, in the main hamlet, I bumped into Neel. As we spoke some men shouted to him that they were looking for the chicken. When I asked Neel what they meant, he laughed replying, 'Oh that was Duka and Bhoja Munda – they wanted that particular bit of good land. They've got it, and so now they are going to bring me a chicken.'

## The Puzzle

One thing puzzled me about the events I have described. Darshan and his family were no longer the *zamindars* of the village. In fact many branches of the lineage had become materially poorer than some of the Munda families. Darshan himself was known in the village for continually having a cash-flow problem and endlessly borrowing money from many of the Mundas. As a result of the successive division of land with inheritance down the lineage, he only owned a third of the land owned by old Charka Munda. All these 'facts' were known by the Mundas.

This puzzle led me to ask: Where did Darshan and his family's power to redistribute the *bhutkhetta* lands to the Mundas come from? And why did the Mundas continue to let the *ex-zamindars* treat the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* functionaries in a way that constructed them as their servants? To answer these questions, a vital first step is to determine how control over the land in Tapu has developed over time.

## The History of Land Relations <sup>25</sup>

### The rise of *zamindars* and the first settler status

People in Tapu say that the area was once thick, dense, forest. When the people of the Munda descent came, they cleared patches of land to make clusters of houses and lived off food gathered in the forests.<sup>26</sup> In time, the Mundas gave shelter to the Oraon tribe, as

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<sup>25</sup> My construction of the history of land relations in Tapu draws primarily on oral histories collected from different people in the village. While I collected these histories and I later analyzed them, I have depended on archival material from colonial land settlement records, and on the work of colonial ethnographers and historians, to contextualise Tapu history against that of the wider region.

<sup>26</sup> This theory, that the Munda tribe was the original settler to this region, resonates with much of what is said in the literature about the area (Dalton, 1872; Hunter, 1868; Risley, 1891; Reid, 1912; Roy, 1912, 1915). In fact, it is difficult to know to what extent the ideas of the colonial land settlement officers and anthropologists became engrained as the received wisdom about the area and that thus became incorporated by local people as *the* representation of their past. Standing (1973) rejects the idea of the

the latter escaped conflict in present day Rohtasnagar. The Mundas gave the Oraons their daughters to wed and the Oraons settled in the area. Colonial anthropologists have argued that the Oraons used the plough to cultivate extensive areas of the North Western plateau. As numbers grew, the Oraons stayed in the North Western and Western areas of present Ranchi District and the Mundas migrated southwards, with one group migrating as far as Singhbhum, where they became more commonly known as the Hos (Roy, 1912: 127-130, 134; Risley, 1891: vol 1: 320-1). Tapu was at the border of this Oraon – Munda area.<sup>27</sup>

The whole area, Munda and Oraon, was divided into *parhas*,<sup>28</sup> comprising between five to twenty-one villages each. A cluster of eight villages was called the eight *parha*, ten villages was called the ten *parha*, twelve villages was called the twelve *parha* and so on.<sup>29</sup> It is debatable whether this *parha* organisation was inspired by the Oraons (Roy,

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Munda tribe as the original settler. She argues that in its original usage the term Munda meant a wealthy man or head of a village responsible to the superior landlord for tribute and revenue exactions, and only under the British did the term Munda come to mean a particular kind of person and a whole scheduled tribe defined in ethnic terms (Standing, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> As a result of European attempts to categorise the Mundas and Oraons, it is generally held that the Oraon language was a Dravidian language whereas the Mundari one was not considered to belong to either the Aryan or the Dravidian types. Since the Oraons spoke a Dravidian language, it was held that they were Dravidians (originally the terms Aryan and Dravidian were used for races) but the Mundas were not included under either. They were certainly not Aryans but neither were they considered Dravidians. Instead they were said to belong to the Kolarian race from where the term Kol for Mundas originated that came to be seen by Mundas and Oraons as a term for abuse.

<sup>28</sup> In other tribal areas similar systems of socio-political governance are said to exist. In Santhali areas it is called *pargana*, headed by a *maji parda*, in Ho areas it is called *pir* headed by a *Manki*, and in Munda areas it is also called *parha* and headed by a *Munda*.

<sup>29</sup> Roy (1915) thinks that the *parha* marked an advance from socio-political hunting groups and grouped men of several clans together. Sachidananda (1979) on the other hand claims that *parha panchayats* were the union of a number of villages of the same clan located around the village origin – i.e. that they were kin based and that it was an increase in population that caused the formation of these groupings. It is possible that in different areas the origin and composition of the *parha* will have their own history and identity. In Tapu area it is not possible to say what the origins of the *parha* might have been. With the mass mixing of people characteristic of the period of the Ratu *Maharajah's* rule, villages in the area no

1912) or whether it evolved amongst the Mundas (Reid, 1912). In the Tapu area, local people prefer to argue that the *parha* has been a feature of all tribal areas since the beginning of time.

A male divine king, a *raja*, was assumed to have presided over each *parha* and originated from the village in the *parha* that was ascribed the status of a *raja* village. The role of this *raja* was to protect allied villages from human and non-human, and natural and supernatural foes. He was to maintain harmony in the area by taking collective decisions and settling disputes. Disputes were described as taking one of the following forms: a dispute between two villages in the *parha*; disputes between different lineages in a village; disputes over land ownership; and disputes of tabooed relationships between men and women (adultery, incest, sexual relations between members of the same lineage or clan, inter-tribe sexual relations).

It is thought that over time a superior chief arose, a *maharajah*, and that he resided at Khukhra, about ten kilometres as the crow flies from Tapu. He was a Munda.<sup>30</sup> Over time he began to control a vast area which included the present Ranchi and Hazaribagh Districts as well as parts of the Palamau District area. As a *maharajah* of the village communities he received tributes and personal services. It is possible that this was the first system of rent collection. Interestingly, the land settlement reports refer to this tribute as '*chanda*', a word that is generally associated with a contribution or an offering for spiritual purposes. This may indicate that the *maharajah*, at that time, was seen as both the secular and the spiritual leader of the area.

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longer retained clan based continuity. For example, brothers from the same family migrated to different, and often far off, villages and thus villages came to compose of non-related individuals from different clans.

<sup>30</sup> His name, people say, was Phani Mukut Rai and he was more commonly known as the Nagbansi Raja. Colonial writers have debated whether this chief was elected or succeeded in imposing his supremacy over others. They have also debated when he became a *maharajah*. Roy ventures two opinions - in one place he says that the elections took place in 64 A.D (Roy, 1912: 139-140) and in another says it was around the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD (Roy, 1912: Appendix IV, ixix). Reid speculates that it was around 10<sup>th</sup> century AD (Reid, 1912: 13).

It is said that the *maharajah's* family were originally tribal (Munda) and as they prospered, converted to Hinduism through marriage 'up' into Rajput families of Pachete and Singhbhum. At this time, it seems, the *maharajah* considered it to be higher status to be Hindu. Today, however, after the creation of a separate state of Jharkhand from Bihar in November 2000, the *maharajah's* descendants are keen to claim their 'tribal' origins.<sup>31</sup>

As part of their historical upwardly mobile strategy, successive *maharajahs* tried to persuade other Hindus – especially Rajputs and Brahmins, from Bihar and the Central Provinces - to settle in the area.<sup>32</sup> They achieved this by granting other Hindus land and villages. *Maharajah* marriage into Rajput families therefore brought in the area a larger Brahminical world that had probably been of little previous importance. Although this was a pattern common in the area more generally, it is important to note that not all the villages were given to Hindus. In the Tapu area at least seven villages out of 114 were given to Muslims. Furthermore, some of the villages remained as '*khas*' property of the *maharajah*, meaning that they were under his (more) direct control. These latter villages usually remained largely tribal and a selected tribal family was given the responsibility of collecting taxes – hence becoming like a *zamindar* family.

The Hindu settlers were not initially, therefore, the land owners and were only entitled to the tribute and petty services formerly rendered to the Chiefs. Not content with this, the

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<sup>31</sup> Tribal origins today mean a right to government reservations for people with Scheduled Tribe status. As Jharkhand's fight for separate state status was based on its tribal identity, being classified as 'tribal' today has become highly politically significant for the local elite.

<sup>32</sup> Almost all authors writing on Jharkhand (Weiner, 1978; Devalle, 1992; Roy, 1912; Singh, 1972; Das; 1992) talk about how these people came to be known locally as '*dikus*' (foreigners). I did not hear the term being explicitly used in the village unless I specifically asked people who *dikus* are. It is possible that the reason for this is that Mundas and the Oraons who came to stay in this area were foreigners to the land themselves. In many areas the gifting of villages to alien people began to cause great unrest among the local people from the 1820s and is said to be the cause of insurrections, the most famous of which is the Kol rebellion of 1831-32 (Roy, 1912: 127).

Hindus claimed land from indigenous owners so that, gradually, the former owners became tenants. The Hindu settlers achieved this by ousting, in many cases forcibly<sup>33</sup>, most (if not all) of the original inhabitants of their villages, and replacing them with servants from neighbouring villages who were given the land to rent and hence became *raiya*s (tenants). In this way a number of men who had no agnates in the village and no connection to the original village family were introduced in villages across the area. As Hoffman (1961) notes, this was probably a controlling tactic by the *maharajah* and the Hindus he brought in, as it weakened the tribal village family (Hoffman, 1961: 336).

Having wrested land control from local villages, the Hindu settlers demanded, in exchange for land use, a share of the village produce of which a proportion was given to the *maharajah*. Initially this tribute was probably a fluctuating amount, dependent on the circumstances of different tenants. However, over time, it became an increasingly fixed quantity as the Mughal government, and then the British, made tribute demands on the *maharajah*. These outside governments (the Mughal from 1595 and the British from 1765), left village-level administration largely to the *maharajah*, provided he remitted an annual tribute.

It was from these Hindu settlers that a new class of *jagirdars* or *zamindars* emerged, and, as a result of their status, were given various titles by the *maharajah*; including Odhar, Pandey, Tewary, Tamadar, Devgharia and Brittia. The *maharajah* gave this new class of *jagirs*, a lease of land, for services that they rendered him. This lease gave the Hindu settlers the right to collect the tributes that historically a chief would have received. Hence, a *jagirdar* was one who held such a lease. The *zamindars*, those who originally collected land revenue, were those whom the British came to regard as landlords. Thus, the term *zamindar* came to denote landlords more generally.

Of importance in this history is the relationship between changes in land ownership and village leadership on the one hand, and the rhetoric of first settler status, on the other. Most tribals, locally called *adivasis*, which literally means 'aboriginal' or 'first settlers',

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<sup>33</sup> This was possibly also done with guns which most *zamindars* possessed at the time.

technically became 'second order settlers' in the villages to which they had been moved. In the villages that they took over, the Hindu *zamindars* technically became the first inhabitants. Yet, they were not given the first settler status. In Tapu for example, there is not one family that claims to be a *bhuinhar* or *khuntkhattidar* of the village, and most believe that another village is their *bhuinhari*. Both these terms refer to the pioneers who cleared the lands for their respective families. The first is an Oraon term, the second a Mundari one.<sup>34</sup> The Hindu *zamindars* cannot be called *bhuinhar* or *khuntkhattidar* as the terms are reserved for Oraons and Mundas – historically regarded as the first settlers of the area. Thus in particular villages, such as Tapu, the actual historical chronology of the arrival of the ancestors of people present in the villages today bears little relation to the more general rhetoric of first settler status. In Tapu, of those present in the village today, it was the ancestors of the Odhars who were the first inhabitants but it is the Mundas who have first settler status. 'First settler' status of the tribals is thus a symbolic status.

### **The development of Tapu**

The larger *zamindars*, who controlled several villages that were given in *dan* (as unreciprocated gifts), were usually Brahmins. Sometimes Rajputs were also given large amounts of land. The smaller *zamindars*, who controlled fewer villages, that they had generally purchased, were sometimes not Brahmins or Rajputs but middle castes and sometimes tribal - although I did not hear of Scheduled Caste *zamindars*. The tenants were mostly those referred to by the present government as Scheduled Tribe, ST, (in Tapu this includes Oraon, Munda, Badaik, Maheli) and/or Scheduled Caste, SC, (Lohars of Tapu). Occasionally there were Muslim and higher caste tenants like the Pramaniks (the barber).

Only a few of the *zamindar* descendants are able to recount a knowledge of the *zamindar* history of Tapu. Tapu was one of several villages given by the *maharajah* to a Brahman, a Pathak, as *bhumi dan*, an unreciprocated gift of land. However, the high

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<sup>34</sup> In standard Hindi the word *khunta* is a stake or a share. In Benares '*khunt*' refers to a stake in economic resources (Parry, 2002 – personal communication). It is possible that 'an economic stake in resources' is also what is implied here.

caste Pathak did not see Tapu as a desirable property as it was one of the more isolated villages in the difficult and inhospitable terrain of the forest. It is possible that the Pathak maintained only loose connections with Tapu, for he certainly did not live there. Hence, initially, the ownership of Tapu by the Pathak is likely to have had, at most, a minor impact on the structure of the village.

The Pathak, friendly with Darshan's great grandfather, an Ahir (who herded and milked the cattle of a neighbouring village) sold the whole village of Tapu to him for Rs2200. Darshan's great grandfather then went out to live in and rule his new kingdom - having at the same time bought a small percentage of eight other villages as well. This occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century, most likely in the 1890s.<sup>35</sup> When the *maharajah* (who by that time had moved to Ratu and was hence called the Ratu *Maharajah*) found out about this deal he insisted on an equal sum for himself, and so the whole settlement became more official.

Like neighbouring *zamindars*, the Ahir populated the village with his own troop of servants from elsewhere, including herdsmen, cooks, farm labourers, weavers, basket makers and spirit controllers. He leased them *doin* (lowland) and *tanr* (upland) to cultivate, and *bari* (upland to build houses and have small vegetable gardens), and as such they became his tenants.

The first two servants the new *zamindar* brought were his illegitimate son and a Munda. Both were from neighbouring villages. As other servants arrived, these two came to be known as *jeth raiyat* – a status ascribed to the first tenants. By 1932, there were nineteen men: an Oraon (who controlled spirits), a Khan (the henchman for collecting taxes), two Maheli (the drummers to keep evil spirits at bay in festivals), a Parn (the weaver), a Chic

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<sup>35</sup> People in Tapu generally do not remember dates. This date is an estimate made through a genealogical calculation; that is, by tracing back the family's lineage, taking account of the life expectancy of each generation and then calculating backwards from present day to estimate the dates of a particular generation.



Badaik (another weaver),<sup>36</sup> four Ahirs (a cook, two cattle herders and a labourer), and ten Mundas (mostly to work as labourers and/or to control spirits – who belonged to five different clans and were all unrelated).

The 1932 land settlement survey of the village shows the amount of land the new tenants were given to cultivate. The details are in Figure 2. In return they had to pay the *zamindar* a certain tax, usually in *dhan*. Some of the nineteen men brought brothers or cousins, and wives and children. Those that came alone eventually set up their own families in Tapu. After 1932, five more people were brought from neighbouring villages: a Lohar (blacksmith), another Maheli (who was a basket weaver), a teacher who was an Oraon, another Oraon family brought by the teacher, and a barber. It is worth noting that almost all these tenants would have been defined by the present government as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or Muslim – and hence were at the lower end of the purity-pollution caste continuum. The only tenant of a more middle caste standing was the Pramanik. The Pramanik was presumably brought in, as the Ahir aspired to reproduce Hindu rituals, to act as an assistant to a Brahmin priest and also to cut hair. The Brahmin priest came as and when required. He lived in a village that the Pathak, who had sold Tapu to the Ahir, continued to own and live in himself.

Most people in Tapu believe that the Ahir *zamindar* was the first inhabitant of the village (although this does not affect the fact that the Mundas see themselves as the original settlers of the area). Unsurprisingly the *zamindar* descendants have not tried to dispel this myth. This is because, by making people in Tapu feel that all the land originally belonged to the *zamindar*, they are able to perpetuate a feeling of indebtedness to *zamindar* descendants amongst village inhabitants. In private, some of the *zamindar*

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<sup>36</sup> The Pam does not have descendants in Tapu today and I was not able to acquire much information on this tribe. Hallett (1917) says that Risley's 'Tribes and Castes of Bengal' refers to Chic Badaik's as a sub-caste of Parns who are a 'degraded tribe' of Orissa. Hallett, however, reports that apart from their profession, the connection between the two tribes is doubtful and that in fact the Chic Badaiks claim to be Aryan and Hindus, whilst the Parns that were found in Munda villages spoke Mundari and followed many Munda customs (1917: 69).

descendants confessed that they had heard stories about other families living in Tapu prior to the arrival of the *zamindars*. Apparently these families failed to pay their share of rent for twelve consecutive years. As a punishment, the *maharajah* took away from them their land, and the families left, possibly to go to the tea plantations in Assam and Bhutan. Indeed, one of the *zamindar* descendants happened to bump into a Christian family a few years ago at Ranchi railway station who claimed that they had roots in a village called Tapu in Bero Block. In Tapu too, people talk about a Christian man who came to Tapu about twenty years ago to reclaim his land. He stayed for a few days and never returned.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, Tapu is an example of the broader pattern of *zamindar* village development in the area. It is a village that was acquired by an Ahir *zamindar*, who ousted the original inhabitants, and resettled the village with his own troop of mainly Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families. The latter were brought from a range of neighbouring villages for particular purposes – whether it was to control spirits, as labourers, to herd cattle, or to weave cloth.

### **The relationship between the *zamindar* and the tenants**

Small *zamindars*, those who owned only a handful of villages, like the Ahir of Tapu, were noted at the time to have strained relations with their tenants. This was the result of the severe debt most were in. In an effort to raise funds to repay this debt, the zamindars

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<sup>37</sup> In the North of Bero Block there are many families who converted to Catholicism in the early 1900s following the establishment of the Dighia mission in 1887. To the South, however, there are only few converted Christian families. These have either moved from northern villages or, since the 1970s, have converted mainly to the Seventh Day Adventists, most frequently to escape accusations of witchcraft in the village. The German Evangelical Lutheran Church, the first to set up in Chota Nagpur in 1848, has a project to trace its first four converts. It has found the descendants of three of them – all in the South Bero Block vicinity. The GEL has not yet been able to trace the last convert but speculates that the person was from the area around Tapu. It is then possible that that one of the original inhabitants of Tapu was this GEL converted Christian who then moved away with the arrival of the Ahir. It is, however, doubtful that we shall ever know this for sure. In Tapu at present there are no families who have converted to Christianity.

tried to squeeze as much tribute as possible from the villages they owned (Taylor, 1940: 54). People in the area distinguished between the different characters of smaller-landlords. The *zamindar* of neighbouring Baridih, for instance, was reputed to be a mild fellow. He did not flaunt his wealth and he did not unnecessarily beat people. By contrast, the Lal Shahdeos of Ita Childri village were reputed to exploit and mistreat villagers. In fact, it was villages with such experiences that became the target of the Roman Catholic Church – such as Dighia (near Bero) (de Sa, 1975: 141). In Chota Nagpur, the Roman Catholic Church, especially under Father Lievens (1856-1895), is reported to have gained mass support from tribals who wanted protection from the cruelty of landlords (de Sa, 1975).

Although the *zamindars* in the area had varying reputations, people in Tapu say that most relationships between tenants and landlords were similar to those in the surrounding villages. All tenants had to attend to the *zamindar's* needs immediately, regardless of occupation or time. People often use ploughing to exemplify the extent to which they were at the beck and call of the *zamindar*. Whilst it is generally considered insulting to interrupt somebody who is ploughing, the *zamindar* was not restricted by such etiquette. People he called were obliged to attend to his needs. Similarly, *dhan* in the village could not be harvested until the *zamindar's* own crop had been cut – a practice that continued to exist in some villages until two years ago. People in Tapu say that it was practiced in the village until five years ago.

The *zamindar* also settled all disputes in the village. In Tapu people say that the most common way he did this was by beating them with his *lathi* (stick) and his *chupal* (slippers). These practices established and reinforced, in Tapu and the surrounding villages, a hierarchy in which tenants were the servants of *zamindars*, who in turn were presided over by the *maharajah*. This structure was probably little changed by the abolition of *zamindari* in 1952 and, as the experiences of Tapu demonstrate, continued well into the late twentieth century.

The first courts and police system in the area were established by the British in 1834 through the South West Frontier Agency (cf Reid, 1912). In addition to the fact that these institutions were a long six-hour walk to Ranchi, it is doubtful, as I demonstrate in the next two chapters, that the Mundas thought that they would ever act in their favour. People recall that the police used to come to Tapu occasionally. Their purpose, I was repeatedly told, was to 'wine and dine' with the *zamindar*. Indeed one of the *zamindars* is infamously remembered as saying, '*Police to hamar kuta hein,*' 'The police are indeed my dogs.'

The rise of the *zamindars* also affected the status of the old system of *parha* chiefs. The role of chiefs became reduced to a nominal function, whose status was publicly recognized only at the time of the annual hunt, *Bisu Sirkar*, when a chief led each group of allied villages. Apart from this, the *zamindar* descendants could not recall the presence or importance of the *parha* or a *parha raja* in *zamindar* times. They certainly no longer settled 'secular' matters, such as disputes, for the *zamindars* were *the* government in the area.

For some time, Darshan's great grandfather, the Ahir, and his four sons, Gauri, Kali, Devnath and Indranath (Darshan's grandfather), enjoyed relative prosperity in Tapu. Many of the Mundas recall days when the *zamindar* had a herd of horses, stores of *dhan* and pots of silver hidden under their mud floors. It was during this period that the tenants, that had been brought in to till the lands in return for some of the produce, were the servants to the *zamindars*. As the tenant population grew, however, new generations migrated. Many went to other villages in the area to work as labourers. Some, like members of both Onga and Charka Munda's families, ventured as far afield as Assam to work in the tea plantations.<sup>38</sup> Others went to Calcutta to work on the railway and on

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<sup>18</sup> In 1817 the British had entered Assam to repel the Burmese invasion and later stayed in the area. In 1834 the British appointed a committee to report on the possibility of introducing the cultivation of tea into India. The Assam Tea Company was founded in 1839. This was the beginning of the first tea plantations in the North Eastern States. In 1859 it was realized that the importation of foreign labour was essential, as the local people had made strikes against the British in 1848 and 1859. At first there was an

building sites. The majority of the migrants were usually away for several years before returning, although of course some never came back. There is evidence, as is true of the brick kiln migrants today (Chapter 5), that people migrated to the tea gardens for a plethora of reasons. There is certainly evidence that some ran away from their home villages. Others went for the experience, others because of fights within the household, and still others for prohibited love affairs.<sup>39</sup> However, whilst there was a significant amount of migration, many villagers remained and, as such, the relationship between the *zamindar* and tenant was reproduced.

Understanding the historical development of the village relationships in this way partially explains the ability of *zamindars* to establish rights over *bhutkhetta* lands. It also renders more transparent why Mundas might allow *zamindars* to treat their *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* functionaries as servants. These relationships can, in part, be understood to reflect those that *zamindars* have traditionally held with all their tenants. However, understanding this historical legacy does not yet explain why the tribals are prepared to bow under the burden of history when they are no longer compelled to do so.

According to what many commentators have argued, one might assume that the relationship between the Mundas and the *zamindars* transformed after the abolition of *zamindari* in the early 1950s. Yet, at odds with these accounts, I demonstrate in the next

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attempt to get Chinese labourers (Weiner, 1978) but there were violent episodes with them and the Assamese. In 1859 a Tea Planters Association was formed to organize a system of labour emigration from Lower Bengal (present Jharkhand was included in this) to Assam. By 1884-1885 nearly 45% of the labour in Assam came from the Chota Nagpur plateau. In the year 1866, 84915 labourers were recruited from Chota Nagpur (Government of India, 1931).

<sup>39</sup> In the report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the recruiting and labour districts, Rev Van Hecke notes of labourers leaving for Assam, 'The people are of a peculiar temper, they get angry very easily and run away from home' (1906: 13). In the same report, Father Hoffman notes on how contractors pick labour up, 'The Mundas are very impulsive and sensitive, young people often run away from home, after getting a scolding about something.' Bailey, in his Case 2, notes of a young man who had impregnated a girl was told in a village meeting to provide money to hold a ceremony of purification who chose to leave instead to the Tea Gardens of Assam (1906: 23)

section that, in Tapu, legal reform had little effect on social structures. Instead, I argue that what in fact changed was the ability of the *zamindars* to sustain their material wealth. And that, whilst the abolition of *zamindari* played a significant role in this transformation, the seeds of change must also be understood to have been sown during the *zamindari* period itself. To elucidate this argument, I thus turn first to a decline of *zamindar* wealth that occurred prior to the abolition of *zamindari*.

### **The fall of the Tapu *zamindars* prior to the abolition of *zamindari***

The ex-*zamindar* families in Tapu regard 1932 as the year in which their wealth began to decline. In 1932, the British government began to officially register all the land of Tapu. A legal record, called the *khatiyān*, was prepared. This documented who owned every piece of land and who tilled it. At the time of the survey Devnath had run away from Tapu with a woman from another village to Sonapur, in the central plains of Bihar. Gauri, Kali and Indranath were quick to register all the land of Tapu in their names, leaving Devnath only a very small share, and as a tenant rather than as an owner. As time passed, Gauri was left without a male heir and, as rumour in Tapu has it, he was murdered just before he gave his land rights to his daughter's sons. Meanwhile, Kali had had no children with his first wife, and his Untouchable *rakhni's* (mistress) child was not a legitimate heir. Indeed, being illegitimate, he was given the title Adhikari which, in the area, indicated that he was born of a mixed caste relationship.<sup>40</sup> Before the death of Gauri and Kali, Devnath had returned to the village, and Gauri had him married off to a 'legitimate' wife. It was not until their death, when the family decided to officially divide the remaining land, that Devnath realized the implications of the 1932 records. He was a mere tenant, his rightful share had not been recorded, and Indranath was the emerging *zamindar*.

A neighbouring *zamindar* introduced Devnath to a Mian (Muslim) from his village who had become a clerk in the courts at Ranchi. The Mian *munshi* (clerk) pursued Devnath's case all the way to the Patna High Court. During this process, a great conflict took place

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<sup>40</sup> Adhikari is a title that is also often common to Bengali Brahmins.

in Tapu between the two brothers. The tenants were split into two groups, half fighting for Devnath, the other for Indranath. The Mundas remember these times as the days of *tir-dhanoosh* (bows and arrows). Each side would steal the other's *dhan* and disrupt their harvest. Following the High Court decision, Devnath was rewarded land rights, but only to half of what Indranath had received. Indranath was the larger *zamindar*, but he had spent most of his wealth fighting for the land. As a result of these cases, *zamindar* wealth in Tapu declined well before the abolition of the *zamindari* system in the early 1950s. As their descendants reflect, if these conflicts and struggles had not taken place, Tapu may have remained a wealthy kingdom right up until this day. Such conflict over land between brothers was common to surrounding villages and many *zamindars* lost their wealth prior to abolition in a similar fashion.

### **The abolition of *zamindari***

In the early 1950s, the Nehruvian government sought to eradicate the intermediaries between the Government and the tillers of the soil. In Bihar, this precipitated a string of legal acts and amendments, as *zamindars* sought to challenge any change to the status quo. Finally, in November 1952, the Bihar Government placed a ceiling on land ownership – effectively abolishing *zamindars*. This was to be implemented from April 1st 1953, and was enshrined in the Bihar Land Reforms (Amendment) Act (Patel, 1954: 464-465). The Act made provision to compensate the *zamindars* for, and redistribute any land above, the ownership threshold. Those who had previously been the occupancy-tenants of the *zamindar* became the local owners of the land they tilled, paying the state, the official owners, a yearly tax, equivalent to that which had been charged by the *zamindar*.

This process of *zamindari* abolition has sometimes been portrayed as one of the most successful projects of the Nehruvian era. As Rudolph and Rudolph argued, 'abolition had a profound effect on Indian politics. A class that might have played historical roles comparable to those played by Britain's landed gentry and aristocracy, Prussia's Junkers, Japan's daimyos and samurai, or Latin America's latifundia masters was removed from the historical stage. As a result of abolition, about twenty million tenants

became owners and about fourteen million acres were acquired and distributed' (1987: 315).

Yet, in Tapu, there is little evidence to show that such transformation occurred during the years that followed abolition. In fact, whilst tenants had become local owners of the land they tilled, they did not come to fully understand the implications of this change until much later. Indeed, in practice, it was the *ex-zamindar* family who helped state officials collect rent from their ex-tenants. In this context, it is understandable why many ex-tenants continued to believe that they were still paying tax to the *zamindars* and, furthermore, why they perceived functionaries of the state to represent an alien authority that *zamindars* had long been in contact with. *Zamindars* did not even have to hide the legal implications of the 1953 Act as the status quo was reinforced by the extremely limited access ex-tenants had to knowledge about contemporary state-led transformation.

Much of this stasis was possible because, as the Mundas say themselves, Tapu is a *tapu*, an island – isolated by forest from the rest of the world. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, tenants did not accord the *zamindars* power on the basis of their right to collect rent or on the basis of their mediation with the state, but through the indebtedness tenants felt to the *zamindars* for bringing them to Tapu and giving them land to till, and through the superior material wealth of the *zamindars*.

Tapu exemplifies, therefore, how changes to the state of legal ownership can, in practice, often have little impact on the social structure of an area. Indeed, although writing on land reform in the late 1700s and early 1800s in the old Banaras province, this point was succinctly made by Cohn (1987). He showed how under the Bengal Regulations of 1795, estates declared to be in arrears of revenue could be auctioned off to the highest bidder. In this way, there were many instances in which *zamindar* rights, as well as the obligations to pay the government revenue, were transferred from old Rajput lineages to urban (and often Bhumihar) residents. However, as Cohn notes, 'with the sale of property, the legal position of the traditional *zamindars* changed; but in many cases their



economic, social and political position within their villages and *taluks* [administrative division] was little affected, particularly from the perspective of those inside the village or *taluk*. It didn't seem important to low-caste cultivators or landless workers that the Rajput who for generations had dominated them was legally a *zamindar*, an *ex-zamindar* or a tenant.' (Cohn, 1987: 410).

### **Continuing *zamindar* power: from land to the state**

Changes in the *zamindar* position in Tapu occurred, therefore, for reasons other than their abolition, and the land reform it precipitated. As I have argued, the seeds of change took root between 1932 – 1950. There was a gradual impoverishment of the *zamindar* families as a result of conflict between the brothers. However, to the *zamindars* themselves the legal implications of the early 1950s land reforms were of immense importance. They understood the change, and realised that such change, if fully implemented, would speed their material decline.

Legally, Devnath and Indranath had to give most of the forests and *ghairmazrua* land (land without occupancy rights) to the state, and they had to sell surplus land above the ceiling. As was the case in most of the villages in the area, they were able to offset some of their potential loss by *benami* (spurious) transfers. They also divided land strategically between family members, so as to keep as much of the landholdings as possible under the de facto control of the *zamindar* families. Nevertheless, it was clear that the *zamindars* would lose much of the land they previously controlled. Moreover, the demographic expansion of the *zamindar* families meant that there was less land for each individual. As Bailey notes, for Bisipara in Orissa during the 1950s, multiple inheritance and the low probability of siring a long line of only sons, prevented wealth from remaining within one lineage for more than two or three generations (1957: 85).

It is important to understand how, despite their declining control over land, the *ex-zamindars* sought to maintain their *zamindar* status in the village. To consider this, I now turn to the life trajectories of Darshan and his brothers to demonstrate how the

modern state became vital - albeit to differing degrees - to the way in which they maintained their patronage over the Mundas.

By the late 1950s in Tapu, both Devnath and Indranath were old men and it was their sons who had taken over the duties of the household (see their Genealogy – Figure 5). Devnath had one son. However, as Devnath's share of land had been smaller, it was Indranath, and his family, who remained the wealthier of the two *zamindars*. Therefore, it was they who came to be seen by the Mundas as the main *zamindar* family in the village. Their house had taken on the name that is still used by Mundas in Tapu today, *bakhri-ghar* (the bosses house). Indranath had two wives and four sons (two each). Darshan's father was the second son of the first wife. Darshan's uncle (his father's elder full-brother) and his two sons were murdered. Most Mundas in Tapu circulate the rumour that Darshan's father was behind the murders as he wanted a better share of the land. As the remaining land was to be divided between Darshan and his two brothers, Darshan's father knew that there would be little left of Indranath's initial share for his grandsons. In Tapu he could see the structure of the current land ownership (Figure 3). Darshan would only have 3.33 acres, whilst some of their older tenants would have more than nine acres of land.

To maintain their *zamindar* status, Darshan's father knew that his family could no longer solely depend on their land. He encouraged his sons to gain an education and seek resources outside the village. At this time, following Indian independence, government expenditure on development was beginning to transform the landscape. Roads were being built, development offices set up, and the state bureaucracy was expanding. In time, these institutions came to Jharkhand, and it was through them that Darshan and his brothers sought to sustain their livelihood and status.

Darshan's eldest brother Keshulal, Neel's father, became a Panchayat Sevak in the Ministry of Rural Development. This meant a good steady salary, financial stability and security for their household. He had two Mundas who worked as permanent servants in his house and fields. But his relationship with the Mundas of Tapu gradually dwindled.

Darshan's second brother married the daughter of a wealthy man with no sons and, as such, gained his in-laws' wealth. Instead of a government job, he started a small mining industry in Tapu.

From 1965, the road from Ranchi to Bombay was being made *pakka* (tarmac) by the Public Works Department of the government. This was the first of the numerous of tarmac roads in the area for which gravel was needed. Contractors from Ranchi, the private suppliers to government schemes, came to excavate the blue gneissic stone from the common land in Tapu and chip it into gravel. A small share of the profits went to Indranath. Despite the fact that the 1950s land reforms had made these lands common public property, people in the village still thought Indranath owned the *ghairmazrua* land from which the stone was taken. Darshan's second brother realized that he too could run this excavation business. Moreover, he figured that without the contractors he could gain a larger share of the profit. By 1970 he was working as the clerk of a private contractor on the Ranchi to Lohardaga Road. Through this he learnt what was required in the trade. By 1975, he was supplying his own stone directly to the road building project and was employing many of the Mundas of Tapu in his stone excavation site during the dry months of the year. The profits he made attracted other immediate relatives. Subsequently, as their claims grew, he moved his business to a neighbouring village where labour rates were slightly lower, and where there was no competition from his brothers who were keen to take over the Tapu soil. Today five people continue to excavate stone from Tapu using labour from Tapu, and sometimes neighbouring villages. They are all from the ex-*zamindar* family.

Darshan himself was, for a long time, the 'black sheep' of the family. He grew up to be a drinker, a womaniser, and dissatisfied with the constraints of Tapu, he ran away from home on several occasions to see the world - travelling to Assam and the Northeastern frontier. On the death of his father, and on hearing news about his sick mother, he returned. Yet, whilst his two elder brothers were financially secure, he was not. He had his land to farm and an opportunity to start up a stone business in Tapu to rival his

brothers'. But for both he needed labourers. Thus he saw his relationship with his father's old tenants to be fundamentally important.

By the time Darshan returned to Tapu, Rajgopal, the first son of Indranath's second wife, was seen as *the zamindar* in Tapu. He was the man who wined and dined the police and the Forest Officers, held all the village land records, 'protected' people's access to the courts, acted as the mediating agent between the state and the Mundas, and settled disputes in Tapu. He still made the law in Tapu. To this day, people in Tapu remember him as a flamboyant man: someone who had a propensity for drink; and loved flaunting what was left of his wealth. This remained the case despite the end of *zamindari*, and his relative lack of wherewithal. He still acted as the *zamindar*. He controlled when the harvest of the village was to take place (his fields were harvested first) and took charge over the distribution of land to the *pahan*, the *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries.

Until Rajgopal's death, Darshan helped him fulfill these duties, just as Neel helps Darshan today. Thus when Rajgopal died in 1985, Darshan was well positioned to take over all his roles. Rajgopal's own sons were working outside Tapu, and were, in any case, too young to succeed themselves. In addition to these roles, by the early 1990s Darshan also held contracts to supply stone chips and controlled a portion of the stone excavation and chipping sites in Tapu. During this period the demand for stone chips increased, as a result of the expansion of Government schemes building low cost housing, irrigation wells, and roads. The EIRFP also committed itself to building a check dam in the village. In this way, Darshan became the primary mediating functionary between all government officials and Tapu villagers. Furthermore, as the most dependent of the three brothers on Tapu labour for his livelihood, he had a greater interest in actively controlling village affairs and 'protecting' the access of villagers to the state.

In many ways Darshan's early life-story is reflected in Neel's current life. Neel's elder brother, Chand, has a cycle and tent-house business in Tapu. Chand is materially more

secure and is not dependent on the Mundas of Tapu. Neel tried on several occasions to secure a government job but, despite his father's connections, was unsuccessful. At 28, he is unsure of the future he desires. Perhaps a business in Bero at some point, he tells me, but at present he has little capital to set up such an enterprise. Two years ago he began a stone-chipping business in Tapu for which he is dependent on Tapu labourers. As the government decentralized its development programmes over the last ten years, Neel has also aimed (and succeeded once)<sup>41</sup> to be voted by the village as a contractor on particular development schemes in Tapu. This would give him the ability, if he acted shrewdly, to siphon off at least 10% of the funds for his private use. However, to become a contractor, he is, again, dependent on the votes of the ex-tenants.

There is one more story to tell - that of Rajgopal's own son, Popat, who is today in his late thirties. After working for several years in a truckers' restaurant, a 'line-hotel', on the Ranchi-Bombay road, Popat returned to Tapu to till his own land. In the mid-1990s, the EIRFP targeted the village for its development project and Popat saw his opportunity to become a mediating agent between the Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) and the ex-tenants of Tapu. This would give him the prospect of siphoning off funds and resources. In time it also led him to become *the* mediating agent between the Government Forest Office and Tapu villagers. Thus, Popat began to develop his own set of patron-client relationships with the people of Tapu, distributing resources from an NGO and the Government. This relationship was clear in Popat's rhetoric on the day of the *bhutkhetta* men's selection. He was keen to show me that the process was egalitarian and fair; that the poor were the focus rather than the 'landlords'.

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<sup>41</sup> With one exception, all the contracts of Block Development Schemes have been acquired by members of the *zamindar* descendant lineage. The exception was the first contract which nevertheless went to a Shiv Gope of the same caste as the *zamindars* and who in many ways was seen by most of the ex-tenants as related to the *ex-zamindars*. Nevertheless, the *zamindars* descendants thought themselves superior as Shiv's ancestors had been brought by the *zamindar* to look after his cattle. As I explain in Chapter 6, this contract went to a non-*zamindar* descendant due to a particular set of circumstances as a result of which there was a large conflict in the village as *zamindar* descendants sought revenge.

Unlike their older brothers, Neel's, Darshan's, and Popat Odhar's relationships with the Mundas of Tapu are very important. It enables them to secure both labour and votes. It is in this context that their presence, and not their brothers, at the *bhutkhetta* land distribution must be understood. Neel, Darshan and Popat need to develop a patron-client relationship with the Mundas. To do so they have come to share the domains through which these relations can be reproduced: by employing labour; by connections with the Block Office; or through the EIRFP. Together they construct themselves as the providers of common resources. Indeed, most Munda families have kin employed either in Darshan or Neel's stone chipping enterprises, or as manual labour for the daily wages of the Block Office or the EIRFP development schemes, projects that they understand were brought in by the *ex-zamindar* contractors. Moreover, Munda families access state resources, such as the Below Poverty Line (BPL) benefits of subsidized kerosene oil and grain, because one of the three *ex-zamindars* mediates this supply. Often they believe that these resources are coming from the landlord descendants and not the state. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated, to get resources from the state, like compensation for elephant crop and house damage, the Mundas rely on Neel or Popat to mediate their access to the state officials. Similarly, it is of importance that the community organizer for the EIRFP lived in Neel's house for three years.

These practices, and the histories they reproduce, clarify two central points about the continuing power of *zamindar* descendants. Firstly, it has been shown that, after the abolition of *zamindari*, *ex-zamindars* attempt to sustain their material lifestyles through resources that are directly related (as in the Panchayat Sevak job) or indirectly related (as in the stone excavating business, which began as a result of state construction activities) to the activities of the modern state. In doing so, and in particular through the provision of jobs and the mediation of state resources, it has secondly been shown that the *ex-zamindars* reproduce their patronage status to the Mundas.

Thus, I have shown how and why many *zamindar* descendants attempt to maintain their patronage status despite their progressive decline in wealth. I now turn to the tensions

that exist for the Munda people in Tapu between attempts by *ex-zamindars* to reproduce their status on the one hand, and their declining *zamindar* power on the other.

### **Declining *zamindar* power**

The Mundas reflect that things are not the same in Tapu as they were in 1985 when Rajgopal died. It is obvious that the material wealth of the *zamindars* has significantly diminished. Whereas once there were herds of horses belonging to the *zamindars*, Mundas and *ex-zamindars* both now have bicycles. Whilst the only motorcycle did belong to Neel's elder brother, Chand, Darshan often had trouble paying the Mundas, and had even borrowed money from some of them.

This changing context in Tapu also became more evident as new relations between *ex-zamindars* and *ex-tenants* became clearer in the surrounding villages. The *ex-tenants* farmed their own lands and began to keep all their produce. And they stopped prioritizing the *zamindars'* needs over their own. In fact, most Mundas differentiate between the '*zamindari* times' and today, in terms of starvation. They say that in the old days, even though they tilled a lot of land, they were often hungry. They could not harvest their own *dhan* before the *zamindars* and hence their own would often rot in the fields. These days, however, despite having less land per family, due to a population increase, they say that no one starves.

The market, both for land and labour, had also become more accessible to the Mundas. Indeed many, like Onga Munda, had returned from the tea plantations, where the labour market was becoming saturated and people were falling too ill to work. In Tapu, Rajgopal was often keen to sell land as he was increasingly short of money. And it was village land that some Mundas could purchase with money saved from their earnings in the tea plantations. During the 1960s local produce markets opened up and *ex-tenants* became freer to sell their surplus produce. For those who had no surplus produce in the dry months, there were opportunities to work as day wage labourers outside Tapu: in the farms of more wealthy *ex-zamindars* of neighbouring villages; in the stone chipping business in neighbouring villages; or as manual labourers on the various government

development schemes building roads, dams, culverts, and bridges. In addition, if they wanted a bit of fun and adventure away from the constraints of village life, villagers could go away for six months of the year to the brick kilns of Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and sometimes Bihar. Indeed, many people from neighbouring villages had started doing this as early as the 1970s. Thus, Darshan and his family were no longer the main source of livelihoods for the Mundas living in Tapu. There were plenty of alternatives, both locally and outside the Tapu area.

As a result, the economic strata in Tapu has changed. On the one hand, *zamindar* descendants are still quick to remind Mundas of the generosity of their forefathers, through whom most have acquired land. Most Mundas acknowledge and, in some way feel indebted for this. Moreover, for some, there are now new types of indebtedness created through the patron-client relations of employment and state mediation. Indeed, of the few Munda families who remain totally dependent on the *ex-zamindar* families, most continue to drop all and respond to the beck and call of the *ex-zamindars*. The numbers of such families are, however, few and of the 43 Munda households in Tapu, only about nine (20% of the Mundas) are more or less dependent for a livelihood on members of the old *zamindar* lineage.<sup>42</sup> Thus, most Mundas are no longer solely dependent on the *ex-zamindars*. A direct consequence is that those who have become more independent, through their own fields or alternative sources of income, not only complain about Darshan and his family in the privacy of their own houses, but they also no longer publicly behave as the servants of the *ex-zamindars*. In fact while I was in Tapu, some of Darshan's family members often complained about how hard it was to get labourers: 'These days everyone does as they please, they follow their own mind.' In this vein *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries often go only reluctantly to construct wedding stages for Hindu marriages. As Darshan himself indicated, they see little need to comply with

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<sup>42</sup> I calculated this figure from my observations on the work people do and whom they do it for while I was in Tapu between November 2000 and May 2002. Although I think that this estimate is accurate for the time period considered I would like to point out that it is not always the same families that remain dependent on the *ex-zamindars*. In some years, some of these families may for instance decide to leave the village and migrate seasonally to the brick kilns.



his regulations, for instance, why bring mud for the upkeep of his mother's temple when none of them use it? As such, there is significant change today from the times, during the 1980s, when *de facto zamindar* rule remained more or less in place.

Yet, whilst change has taken place, *ex-zamindars* seek to continue patron-client relations with the Mundas. The continued importance of this patronage could, potentially explain the power that Darshan and Neel retain to redistribute the *bhutkhetta* lands. This is reproduced from the preexisting system – one in which *zamindars* held the right to redistribute land.

There is, therefore, significant conflict and contradiction in the way in which Mundas think of the *zamindars* as patrons. However, this contradiction also points to the fact that there is potentially yet another layer of explanation needed to understand the present day relations between the *zamindar* and tenant descendants. Indeed, it may be important to ask why is it that the distribution of the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* land is important to the Mundas.

### **The Significance of the *Pahan* and *Paenbharra***

One might predict that the importance of the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* land lies in the material gain it can bring. In the case of the *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries, this sometimes rings true. Some, like the two who were to give Neel a chicken, want particular plots of land. However, most people were not in the least bit bothered about which plots of land they received. In fact, Popat and his family were often complaining that many did not till it with much care, and some abandoned it to migrate to the brick kilns. For the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*, the spiritual functionaries, the situation was slightly different. They had to feed the entire village three times a year from the land. This meant much hard work and a responsibility of growing at least a set amount of rice. Personal profits of rice were negligible. And, in fact, as the current *paenbharra* has done, they sometimes gave it in *sajha* to men (a Gope in this case) who would cultivate

the fields for them and take half of the produce. The *pahan* already had too much land to look after. The material benefit of the land was not therefore a high priority. So why were these lands important to the Mundas?

### **The significance of the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* for the Mundas**

The Mundas believe that all aspects of life must be legitimized by the spirits. They believe that the spirits control all the goods and the ills of life, from earthquakes, cyclones, floods and droughts to malaria, typhoid and other diseases. Controlling these events are many different types of spirits - ancestral spirits, spirits of people who died unhappy deaths, or forest spirits. Mundas believe that humans have to maintain a constant connection with the spiritual world and keep the different spirits pleased so as to ensure security and well-being in their own lives. Aspects of life not legitimized by the spiritual world have the possibility of being considered dangerous and alien.

Different spirits need to be propitiated in different ways. The most powerful spirits, to whom floods, disasters and epidemics are attributed, are believed to be located in particular bits of land, rock and water. They have names such as *darha*, *deswali* and *sarna mai*. These spirits can only be propitiated by the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*. The Mundas believe that these spirits resided in the forest before it was cleared to make way for human cultivation. The real owners of the land are, therefore, the spirits. As first settlers, the Mundas started to live in conjunction with the spirits and since they took over some of the spirits' land, the spirits had to be appeased, propitiated and continually thanked for Munda well being. Given that these are the roles of the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*, these functionaries are understood to maintain the material balance of the village through their links with the spiritual world.

Propitiation of these spirits is undertaken by the *pahan* and *paenbharra* through sacrifices at particular times of the year that are connected with the agricultural cycle. The four main times of propitiation are all marked by big festivals in the village. The first, in *Aghan* or November-December is the *Khalihani* festival which happens the day

before the (s)election of the *pahan* and *paenbharra*. The Mundas thank the spirits before the first harvest by sacrificing chickens of various colours and sizes.

The second festival is *Fagua*, in the month of *Fagun*, or February-March. It happens at the same time as the Hindu festival *Holi*.<sup>43</sup> For the *Fagua* festival a mini-forest is created in Tapu every year. It is set on fire and plaits of hay, that are symbolic of spirits residing in the forest, are rehoused by the Mundas. This, I suspect, is a reenactment of the rehousing of the spirits that took place during the deforestation (by burning the forests) of initial Munda settlement in the area. At the festival, a ritual is performed whereby a young unmarried man, chosen by the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*, sits naked under a tent of hay that is then set on fire. The boy runs out of the tent after performing the sacrifice of a frog. Sacrificial offerings of frogs, cow dung and *erendi* fruit cooked in clay pot are then left in leaf plates for the spirits to eat. I believe that this festival once involved human sacrifice and was possibly the most important propitiation time for the displaced spirits of the village.<sup>44</sup>

The third major propitiation period is *Sarhul* in *Cheith* or March-April when chickens of various colours are again sacrificed. Peculiar to *Sarhul* are the flowers from the *sal* tree, the most common tree in the forests, which are collected by the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* who then give a stem to each house. However, although I witnessed *Sarhul* twice in Tapu, I have not yet been able to get to the bottom of its significance in relation to the world of spirits. The fourth major propitiation time is *Kadoletta* in *Bhadon*, the rainy season of August and September when rice is sown. The period marks a request to the spirits to ensure a good crop that year. Here, again, chickens of various colours and sizes are sacrificed by the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* for the spirits.

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<sup>43</sup> In Tapu the rituals of *Fagua* and *Holi* are conducted completely separately. The Mundas conduct *Fagua* and at the same time the *zamindar* descendants conduct the rituals of *Holi*. Although the *ex-zamindars* delude themselves about the difference, there appear to be many parallels in the two festivals. For instance, the burning *Holika* of *Holi* is like the fire of the forest in *Fagua*.

<sup>44</sup> I heard several stories about human sacrifices taking place in surrounding villages until as recently as five years ago. Young children are still not allowed to go to the forest on their own at this time of the year for the fear of becoming the prey of a *pahan* of a neighbouring village.

I do not want to elaborate on the details of the different spirits, the ways of propitiation, the symbolisms of the rituals, but the important points to take from this are that for the Mundas all aspects of life must be legitimated by the spirits, and all spirits must be kept happy and propitiated by humans. It is the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* that have the ability to propitiate those spirits.

The descendants of the first settler family of a particular village, the *bhuinhar*, who cleared the first land from the forest and rehoused the spirits, has the ability to be the *pahanai* and the *paenbharai* family of the village. In villages where *bhuinhar* families exist, the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* are thus inherited posts, passed down through a lineage by the eldest son of each generation.

In a place like Tapu, however, where no *bhuinhar* exists, because the original inhabitants have been resettled, a problem arises because humans cannot know who will have the ability to propitiate the spirits. To overcome this problem, a process is established whereby the spirits are asked to decide for themselves which humans will have the power to propitiate them for a particular period. This is the process that I described at the beginning of the chapter of the blindfolded man getting possessed by a spirit, who then leads the man to the houses of the people the spirits would like to make the new *pahan* and the new *paenbharra*.

Given the drunken atmosphere during the (s)election, I first thought that these roles were in complete decay. I later realized, however, that since no mortal could possibly (s)elect the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*, it was of little concern whether the Mundas were drunk or not. Moreover, there was much evidence that the spirits, too, enjoy a drink. In fact, in any Munda festival, people always offer a drink to the spirits first and, as Onga Munda had done, pour a drop of alcohol on the ground as an offering to their ancestral spirit. Furthermore, it could even be argued that, drinking at such occasions demonstrated a lack of concern about the material implications of (s)election and, as such, a

commitment to the belief that spiritual matters should not be reflected upon in terms of material gain.

Mundas in Tapu also believe that only they have the necessary power required to be the *pahan* and *paenbharra*. Indeed, reflecting on that year's (s)election, Onga Munda told me that 'this (s)election has been very fast. Sometimes the spirit goes to at least ten different houses before eventually settling.' To this I asked, 'what if the spirit settles in a non-Munda house? Can that person be a *pahan*?' He replied, 'in that case, the matter is quite straightforward, the non-Munda in whose house the spirit has settled simply passes the responsibility over to a Munda.' This last occurred three years ago, when a Badaik was chosen and twelve years before that, a Gope. Both men had given the responsibility to a Munda of their choice. After speaking to Onga, I chatted with these men about why they had shifted their responsibility. Both told me that it was impossible for them to appease the spirits since Mundas had the exclusive ability to control the spiritual balance of the village.

This belief is even held in surrounding villages where there are no Mundas. Here Oraons can propitiate the spirits but only by acting as, or in the name of, Mundas. In fact, although government classification would not differentiate between these Scheduled Tribes, there is a hierarchy that positions the Mundas as the superior of all Scheduled Tribes. At a first glance it appears that this superiority derives from their symbolic first settler status in the area. This is true, but it is not only for symbolic reasons. First settler status is important precisely because it was the Mundas who disturbed the spirits, and it was thus they who knew how to control and propitiate them. This is important. Mundas are superior to all other groups in their ability to communicate with the spiritual world. Indeed, Mundas believe that this is why *zamindars* brought them to the village. Unable to control control the spirits themselves, *zamindars* needed the Mundas to keep the village peaceful. This is why Mundas continue to believe that it is a real honour for any Munda to be chosen as a *pahan* or *paenbharra*. It means becoming the spirit's representatives on earth.

This does not of course mean, however, that all *pahans* and *paenbharras* are effective at their job. Some are often lazy and neglectful and in these cases they are punished through a village fine. This supports the Munda belief that the job embodies the ultimate responsibility in the village. However, despite laziness on the job, I was never aware of any Munda trying to shirk the responsibility and potential danger of becoming the *pahan* or *paenbharra* in Tapu.

Belief in, and commitment to, the spiritual aspects of these functions does not, however, rule out the potential for the system to be corrupted. In fact the Mundas in Tapu claim that in other villages this has indeed occurred. They often give the example of neighbouring Baridih. There the (s)election of the *pahan* is also meant to take place through the magical winnowing basket. However, about five years ago, the process was suspended and the position was taken up permanently by an ex-MLA, Ganga Tana Bhagat, an Oraon man. He claimed that as the magical winnowing basket repeatedly kept entering his house, the spirit was trying to say that she had chosen the family in the village with whom the right of *pahanship* should permanently remain. This is greeted by Mundas in Tapu with skepticism, and they believe that his claim is based solely on a greed for land. This comparison, however, allows the Mundas of Tapu to consider that Tapu's (s)election process reflects the purity of the way in which things should be done – that the spirits are given the right to choose regardless of what happened in the past. Indeed, although I would not like to claim that this has always been true of Tapu, in continuous probing of the history of the (s)election of the last five *pahans* and *paenbharras* (implying at least the last fifteen years), I did not discover any evidence of manipulation. That this is the likely case is given weight by the fact that the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* in Tapu receive only negligible material benefits.

In Tapu, the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* lands are differentiated from material benefit and remain set aside for the propitiation of spirits. (As I have argued, this is also the case for the *bhutkhetta* lands which mean both 'spirit' and 'former times'). This is the crucial point. Whilst today, the Mundas may contest the rights of ownership of

neighbouring lands, the spiritual lands remain differentiated,<sup>45</sup> not only as a place where some of the spirits may reside, but also as lands to appease the spirits. As such they cannot be owned by individuals, and can only be looked after by the Mundas, who are the most connected to the spiritual domain. The logic of the redistribution of spiritual land must, therefore, be understood as follows: the way in which the spirits have always worked should not be tampered with, as this is the spirits' chosen way. The lands are hence passed down in the way that has already been established by the spirits, and this, most crucially, is under the direction of the *ex-zamindar* families. In the case of the land of the helpers, the *bhutkhetta* lands, the *ex-zamindars* also select the beneficiaries. In the case of the most important officials, the *pahan* and *paenbharra* lands, the *ex-zamindars* materially control the spiritual land (for instance, by taking the tax). In doing so, however, the *ex-zamindars* continue to defer to the spirits by leaving the (s)election of the functionaries to the spirits. This deference enables the *zamindar* descendants to manipulate the system, as their authority, derived by treating the *pahan*, the *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* men as virtual servants in particular contexts, is historically legitimized in the Munda view by the ultimate bosses, the spirits.

### **The significance of the *pahan* and *paenbharra* for the *ex-zamindars***

There is much evidence to show that before the time of the *zamindar*, Ahirs were the cattle herders of Oraon and Munda villages (Roy, 1915: 46; Russel and Hira Lal, 1916: 22-25; Yorke, 1976: 71-74). Yorke argues that in a Ho (Munda) village in Singhbhum, Jharkhand, the Ahirs (called Gopes or Gau) stem in fact from a local Ho lineage who have taken up the professional task of cattle herding as a hereditary occupation (Yorke, 1976: 70). He even suggests that the lineage of a Ho man who took the job of cattle herder might, over time, become Gope rather than Ho. This points to the fact that the

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<sup>45</sup> This ability to have different notions of ownership is well captured by David Lan writing on the Shona in Zimbabwe. Amongst the Shona, there is the notion that the people whose ancestors bring the rain own the land. 'Ordinary people have the right to use the land they occupy because it was allocated to them or to their lineage by the chief,' however, he argues, the question "who owns the land?" has always meant which royal lineage owns land and the answer was the "royal lineage whose ancestors bring the rain". (Lan, 1985: 98)

Mundas and the Ahirs are closely related. Moreover, as Yorke suggests, as a service caste, the status of Ahirs was in fact lower than that of the Mundas (Yorke, 1976: 74).

What is significant about the Ahir *zamindar* of Tapu and all his first tenants is their close proximity in terms of the caste-tribe continuum. Given this proximity, succeeding Ahir *zamindars* of Tapu were, I suspect, keen to rid themselves of their lowly title. Indeed, by the time the British surveyed the village in 1932, the sons of the original Ahir *zamindar* had taken the title Maheto. Interestingly *maheto* is the name that was given to a functionary, still existent in many surrounding villages, whose role is to deal with outside authorities. I have often heard the saying that Roy (1915: 68) notes, that '*pahan gaon banata hai, maheto gaon chalata hai*', 'the *pahan* makes a village and the *maheto* runs a village.' The 1932 survey records show that, in the villages around Tapu, the *maheto* was either a hereditary position or a man chosen at the *zamindar*'s discretion.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Roy (1915) argues that the *maheto* was a position which developed after alien landlords came to Chota Nagpur. In Tapu, it seems that the *zamindars* themselves took this title, and brought a strict and strong Muslim to assist in the collection of taxes.

The Maheto title of the *zamindars* in Tapu was subsequently succeeded by the Odhar title, the latter being one given by the Ratu *Maharajah* to distinguish the status of his *zamindars*. Today, the direct descendants of the *zamindars* in Tapu still use Odhar. This enables them to distinguish themselves from the other Ahir origin families in Tapu who, they say, were brought in to graze their cattle. Meanwhile, the indirect descendants of the *zamindar*, those who are the children of daughters and hence cannot rightfully claim Odhar as their title, have preferred to change to Yadav. The Ahir tenant descendants themselves have also taken a different title, that of Gope. So today whilst, the Ahir title is in fact rarely used, there is a hierarchy between the Gopes, Yadavs and Odhars. It is an order linked to their relative connection to *zamindar* status as opposed to rules of purity and pollution.

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<sup>46</sup> In the case of multiple village *zamindars*, some villages had multiple *mahetos*.



This change in status of the Ahir was also reflected in language. The Ahirs (I am told) once spoke Kurukh (the Oraon language), but as *zamindars* they began speaking Nagpuria, the language of the *maharajah* (he was the *maharajah* of Chota Nagpur), which is also sometimes known as Sadri or Sadani (cf Roy, 1912).<sup>47</sup>

Given the original closeness of the Ahir to the tribals, it is possible that they too believed in spirits rather than gods and goddesses. Indeed, they came from a background where appeasement of the spiritual world was vital to the material balance of the world. As such they brought the Oraon and Munda men to appease particular spirits and they supported the system in which the *pahan* and his assistant, the *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* men maintained the village's spiritual balance. For this purpose they set aside *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* lands.

However, as the Ahir acquired *zamindar* status they also became more closely connected to the Hinduised world of the *maharajah* and his other *zamindars*. With this higher status, the Gopes, Yadavs and Odhars sought further distinction from the tribals by defining themselves as Hindu. They acquired Gods: Ram, Hanuman, Durga, Shiva that also became known by the more generic term '*bhagwan*', God. These Gods needed temples or shrines. And with these Gods, the *ex-zamindars* also adopted Hindu rituals and festivals (See Figure 4).

In Tapu today there is a Durga temple that was built by Darshan's mother. In the year that I was there Darshan had it converted from mud to brick. A second temple, to Hanuman, was also being constructed in the middle of the main hamlet amongst the *ex-zamindar* houses. Furthermore, to maintain their purity, Gope, Yadav and Odhar households employ Brahmin priests from another village to perform their marriage and

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<sup>47</sup> Nagpuria slowly became the *lingua franca* in Tapu and today all people in Tapu speak this language (although those who have some school education speak Hindi too). The Mundas and Oraons of Tapu say that it is possible that their ancestors may have spoken Mundari and Kurukh respectively but that somewhere along the line these languages were forgotten so that only women who are brought in from Mundari and Kurukh speaking areas have any knowledge of these languages in Tapu today.

death rituals.<sup>48</sup> A descendant of the Pramanik family who the Odhars brought to Tapu after their 'Hinduisation' assists the Brahmin. The Pramaniks and the Yadavs will not eat each other's *kaccha* (boiled) food indicating that they would like to position themselves as equal in the caste hierarchy (Appendix A). Yadavs and Odhars are nevertheless given a superior status that is a consequence of their *zamindar* roots. They would never, however, claim superior status to the Brahmin priest.

The Hinduisation of the *zamindar's* sacred world thus became posited against the spiritual beliefs of the Mundas. Whereas in the past the *pahan*, the *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries were central to the *zamindar* world, Hinduisation reduced these functionaries, in the *zamindar* eyes, to the more 'lowly' level of exorcism of potentially harmful spirits. As such, the 'exorcism' that only the Mundas performed came to position them as '*jungli*' (literally meaning 'from the jungle' but implying savage, wild, dirty and backward) people. Whilst, the superior sacred function, officiation in the sacred world, of the *zamindar* descendants, came to be performed by the Brahmin priest. This is the world-view that Dumont and Pocock (1959) suggest in their differentiation of possession and priesthood.

Thus, for Darshan and his family today, although exorcism of evil spirits has a role, it is a role inferior to the Hindu deities and controlled by *jungli* tribals. Darshan defines his own festivals and ritual practices as being of the Hindu religion, which in his eyes has a more superior sacred status. However, despite reducing the sacred role of Mundas to that of lowly *jungli* practices, Darshan and his family are quick to give public recognition to Munda beliefs as crucially they can be used to their own material advantage. For example, in 1994 when about ten people died in Tapu, from what medical practitioners would probably have diagnosed as cerebral malaria, a trip was organized by Darshan. One man from each house boarded a truck and went to visit a *bhaktein* (a woman who has the capacity to be a spirit medium and, as a result, the powers to suggest reasons for, and cures of, problems resulting from the unhappiness of spirits) so that she could decide

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<sup>48</sup> The funeral priest who performs the rites ten days after the death is a specialist Brahmin who would not perform wedding rituals.

why it was that the spirits had caused these deaths. The *bhaktein* diagnosed that it was the fault of the then *pahan* and his *sahia* (his friend with whom an official bond has been tied to make him like a kin). They, she said, had angered the spirits, and hence, the fatal damage. In a subsequent village meeting Darshan, Babu, and other members of the *ex-zamindar* family, fined the two men Rs5000 each. Yet, of particular importance is the fact that this money was used to build the Hanuman temple. Furthermore, whilst all the Mundas were convinced the accused *pahan* and *sahia* were guilty, few questioned why the money was being used to build a Hindu temple. In part, as I will elaborate shortly, this was because they do not feel fully excluded Hinduism. Most importantly, however, as in the case of the redistribution of the spiritual lands, to the Mundas the decision about what to do with the fine was a decision of the *zamindars* who had historically dealt with such cases and whose decisions were legitimised by the spiritual realm – and to question such decisions would be to disrespect the spirits.

Furthermore Darshan's patron or 'zamindar' status is dependent on creating a sharp divide between a temporal-material and a spiritual world. This demarcates his and his family's role in the former domain, recognizing publicly that it is only Mundas that have the power to link with the spiritual world. Hence, for example, when he wants the *bhutkhetta* men to do 'gau ka kam', it is not as an instruction from him that he presents their work, but as an order from the *pahan* and the *paenbharra*, who are, after all, the spirit's representatives in Tapu. Another example is Darshan's intervention in the issues raised by the *Khalihani* feast - of reminding the Mundas that they ought to treat the *Mahelis* respectfully as their guests. In this context, Darshan uses the conception of other villagers as 'guests' of the Mundas to refer to the fact that Mundas are to be respected as both the first settlers of the area and, interrelatedly, that they communicate with the spiritual world. By acknowledging and demarcating a domain in which Mundas become superior, he thus creates a hierarchy between this and his own material role as a controller of the land, a mediator to the state and an employer. In this hierarchy the latter are roles that Mundas are happy to leave to the *ex-zamindars*. They see these roles as dangerous, as they involve the world outside of the village domains. As importantly, they also see these roles as diametrically opposed to, and therefore inferior to, the higher

spiritual domain that they command. Thus as long as Darshan appears to value and support, but does not interfere with, this spiritual authority of the Mundas, his material connection with them remains secure.

The situation in Tapu has some parallels with Schnepel's description of 'Jungle Kings' of South Orissa. He argued that an important means through which these jungle kings could pursue their legitimization was through their patronage of tribal goddesses (Schnepel, 1995). My argument is, however, slightly different to that of Schnepel. He suggests that tribal goddesses underwent various kinds and degrees of 'Hinduisation' as a result of royal patronage. For instance, he argues that the original aniconical representations were anthropomorphized, and the goddesses were housed in temples. In Tapu, however, the spirits are not called gods or goddesses, there were no anthropomorphized forms, and there are no temples for the spirits. Moreover, if the way in which spirits are propitiated appears at face value to have been 'Hinduised', my argument is that tribals do not see change to their spiritual practices as resulting from zamindar patronage. As such, the power of zamindar patronage was and remains in not being seen to interfere with the tribal spiritual world, but instead to support it.<sup>49</sup>

### **Munda perceptions of the *ex-zamindar* view**

What I have described so far are two different spiritual world-views. The spiritual world of the Mundas is centred around the control of spirits. They feel that their ability to communicate with the spirits gives them a superior spiritual status to all other people, and that this ability comes from the fact that they were the original inhabitants of the land and thus closest to the spirits who originally resided there. From the *ex-zamindar* perspective the control of spirits is a lowly function that is the responsibility of *jungli*

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<sup>49</sup> Schnepel does not make this case although his own material supports such a conclusion. In some legends of Markama (tribal goddess) the goddess kicks unconscious the Brahmin priest appropriated by the king to do service at her temple and appears to the king in a dream demanding him to bring the low ranking *paik*, the original temple priest, back in charge (Schnepel, 1995: 149-150). Schnepel argues that this legend is evidence that at some point local goddesses and indigenous worshippers resist further absorption. I suggest that the royal patronage is dependent on not absorbing the tribal goddess.

people. Their own world is marked by the maintenance of purity and pollution and, in this world-view, they are superior to the more polluted Mundas. Despite their secular status as *zamindars* they would never, however, claim to have a higher status than the Brahmin priest. Their secular status is encompassed in the absolute superiority of the spiritual plain; in which Brahmin priesthood is of a transcendent nature (Heesterman, 1959).

However, this does not mean that the Mundas in Tapu think of their own world solely in terms of their superiority to control spirits. Mundas acknowledge that Yadavs have a different view of the world in which they exist towards the bottom. In fact, if asked about their position in a *jati* hierarchy and the *varna* system of caste, they do not deny that they are in the lower echelons. It does not follow, however, that the Mundas have come to believe or have bought into the Yadav world-view. Instead it demonstrates how people have contradictory ways of viewing their own world depending on the particular context in which they are in.

These contradictory ways of viewing the world were further exemplified in conversations I had with Mundas in Tapu about what *dharma* (religion) they were and the extent to which they considered themselves Hindu. Many were unsure, but some would often say, 'why not Hindu?' At first I was very confused by this acknowledgement of association with a Hindu identity until I realized several things. One was that they had no term for their own religion. In fact this was the same difficulty that Government officials had when drawing up the national census: the officials had little idea about how to classify tribal religion, and thus used the term animism to denote people, 'who are neither Hindus nor Muhammedans, but have no word for their religious beliefs' (Census of India, 1901, vol 1, pt 1: 349).<sup>50</sup> Actually, religion to the Mundas in Tapu had three names; Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. They had not been converted to Christianity or Islam and thus identified closest with Hinduism. Moreover, Darshan and his family had been careful to present an inclusive model of their rituals. Like their

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<sup>50</sup> Later people denied the suitability of the term in explaining the religion of the tribals (cf Hoffman, 1936, vol II:534; Roy, 1912:467).

predecessors, they needed the *pahan*, *paenbharra* and *bhutkhetta* beneficiaries as free labour. For example, they wanted to rebuild the Durga temple and thus presented it as a common village temple. In this context, asked if they were Hindu, most Mundas would not deny it, although they would be keen to make a sharp distinction between themselves as having Munda customs and the Pramanik and Yadav as having their own.<sup>51</sup>

The co-existence of these two world-views has significant implications for modern politics in Jharkhand. Indeed, contest has arisen as different groups in Jharkhand have tried to deploy these views in different ways and for different ends. On the one hand there is the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*, RSS, which has been keen to persuade the tribals that they are in effect Hindus since their current rituals and practices are related to those that Hindus practiced in the past. However, the RSS perpetuates the idea that these tribal practices are lowly and impure and argues that, like other Hindus before them, the *adivasis* must reform to become 'higher' – and, in turn, 'proper' Hindus. The RSS deploys a view with parallels to that proposed by Ghurye (2000 [1943]) that the Scheduled Tribes were 'degraded Hindus' who needed to be assimilated back into the mainstream of Indian life.

In Tapu the direct involvement of the RSS is not yet very significant. However, some of their practices in other areas have, through a network effect, come to affect Tapu too. For example, since the 1970s, the area has seen the celebration of Ramnavmi in a mass parade that leaves from Tapu and the surrounding villages and culminates in Bero. Another example is the construction of the Hanuman temple. Whilst the *ex-zamindars* are not members of the RSS, their aspiration to build the temple reflects, like other villages, a trend of Hanuman temple construction that the RSS has established in other parts of the country.

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<sup>51</sup> Bailey (1960) notes similarly of the Konds in Bisipara. They accept categorization under a broad Hindu umbrella but at the same time recognise a distinct 'Kond' custom from an 'Oriya' or Hindu one (Bailey, 1960: 4).

On the other hand, there is a movement led by educated tribals who are part of a middle class. Initially important during the early 1960s as an opposition to Christian conversion (see Chapter 5), these classes have now mobilized to oppose the RSS. Their efforts, often led by anthropologists, as well as socio-political activists in Ranchi, seek to create a united-peace-loving tribal religion, called '*Sarna*' that can be represented as the worship of nature (Munda, 2000). Amongst other reforms, *Sarna* proposes one superior God, *Sarna Mai*, an official day on the same day every year, *Sarhul*, and attempts to replace the barbarism of sacrifices offered to the spirits by the more vegetarian practice of breaking a coconut (Munda – personal communication, 2002). This trend bears, however, little relation to the way in which most tribals in Tapu understand their beliefs. To them, *sarna* is a grove of trees in which *one* of the spirits, *Sarna Mai*, resides. *Sarhul* is celebrated not only on differing dates each year depending on the lunar calendar but also on different dates in different villages so that one village can go to another's *Sarhul* festival. Furthermore, people's activities are based around propitiating, through blood sacrifice, spirits that happen to reside in nature. They are not about the worship of nature itself.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite the fact that half a century has passed since the abolition of *zamindari*, in villages like Tapu, the Hindu *ex-zamindars* still retain the power to redistribute spiritual lands to the Munda *ex-tenants* within the village. In this chapter I have explored the way in which this power can be explained. I have argued that mere legal reform had little effect on the socio-political structure of the village. The decline of the *zamindars* in Tapu begun prior to the Land Reform Acts of the 1950s, and did not become more pronounced until many years after the Acts. Although abolition hastened the process, the Mundas understood the decline not through an appreciation of change in ownership of land but in terms of the collapse in material wealth of the *zamindars*. In an attempt to sustain their material lifestyles and their patronage status to the Mundas, the *ex-*

*zamindars* directly or indirectly tapped resources emerging from the activities of the modern state.

The maintenance of a patron-client relationship between some of the *ex-zamindars* and the Mundas can, in part, explain why the *ex-zamindars* continue to hold the power to redistribute spiritual lands to the Mundas. From this perspective, their power is just the continuation of a preexisting system of redistribution rights over land that the *zamindars* has historically held over all of their tenants. However, as a result of the decline in wealth of the *ex-zamindars*, as well as the fact that most Mundas are not fully dependent on the *ex-zamindars* for their livelihoods, there is now significant conflict and contradiction in the way in which the Mundas think of the *zamindars* as their patrons. In this vein, it may follow that Mundas today question the right of *ex-zamindars* to redistribute spiritual lands. This, however, is clearly not the case.

I have thus argued that, to understand the current pattern of redistribution, it is crucial to note that the spiritual lands hold a spiritual, and not a material, value for the Mundas. Spiritual lands are set aside for the propitiation of spirits and, as such, they are lands that cannot be owned by human mortals. I argue that the logic of the redistribution of spiritual land is underpinned by Munda belief in, first, the ways in which the spirits have always worked, and second, that those ways should not be tampered with as they are the spirits' chosen ways. As a result, the lands are redistributed in a way established by the spirits, and this is under the direction of the *ex-zamindar* families who appear to defer to the spirits. In doing so, they manipulate the system as it spiritually legitimizes their role as patrons whom the *pahan*, the *paenbharra* and the *bhutkhetta* men often have to serve. In fact, the end distribution of land is of little importance to the Mundas. Instead, their concern is that spiritual lands can only lie with the Mundas since they are the symbolic first settlers, and as such they are the only people who have the ability to propitiate spirits and become connected to the spiritual domain.

This Munda understanding is in contrast to the *ex-zamindar* view of the world. The latter believe that the control of spirits is a 'lowly' and 'polluted' function of mere exorcism,



one which is engaged in by '*jungli*' people. The superior spiritual domain is instead understood to be under the aegis of the Brahmin priest. However, it is clear that the *ex-zamindars* are quick to give public recognition to Munda beliefs within the village and to use them to their material advantage. In fact, I argue their patronage status is dependent on creating a sharp divide between a temporal and a spiritual world, demarcating their own role in the former domain (in controlling land, acting as a mediator to the state and as an employer) and recognizing publicly that only Mundas hold the powers to link to the spiritual world. *Ex-zamindar* temporal power is, therefore, partly dependent on appearing to value, and not interfere with, the spiritual authority of the Mundas. Seeing these former roles as outside the domains of their world-view, and therefore as inferior and dangerous, the Mundas are happy to leave the temporal roles to the *ex-zamindars*.

Understanding the differing Munda and *ex-zamindar* world-views in this way holds implications for the way in which differing perceptions of the modern state can be understood. This is the focus of the next two chapters. Of interest here though is the fact that the Mundas, as the first settlers of the area, believe that only they can propitiate the spirits and, as such, that they have a superior status to all other people in the area. The modern state and its officials, not connected to the Munda world of spirits and alien to the area, thus holds little legitimacy in Munda eyes. In contrast, however, the *ex-zamindars*, are considered to have some legitimacy as patrons because, first, they brought the Mundas to the village, and secondly, they support Munda spiritual beliefs.

The *ex-zamindars*, despite privately seeing the Mundas as exorcists of potentially harmful spirits, promote this Munda world-view as it encourages the Mundas not to interfere in the domain of life not legitimized by the world of spirits - the temporal sphere of the modern state. I now turn in the next two chapters, to how this enables the *ex-zamindars* to control mediation with the modern state, and accrue the benefits that can be derived from it.

### **Chapter 3: Understanding the Developmental State: The Implementation of Ministry of Rural Development Scheme**

The Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, or DWCRA, was one of several development schemes that every Block Development Office (or Block Office) had to implement as part of their guidelines. These guidelines were drawn up and distributed by the Ministry of Rural Development in New Delhi.<sup>52</sup> The Ministry launched DWCRA in 1982 (partially funded by UNICEF until 1996) in response to the criticism that programmes of economic and social development for the poor reproduced a structural male bias. DWCRA aimed at improving the economic condition of poor women and supporting their control over family incomes. To do this, DWCRA promoted the collective participation of women in income generating activities, enabling groups of women to generate self-help savings, and ultimately enhancing their status.

The Ministry's role in this 'economic empowerment' of women was, for the most part, low resource in comparison to other schemes – it was to provide an additional village level worker who would introduce the so-called 'participatory principles' of DWCRA to poor rural women. The village worker was to be supervised by the Ladies Extension Officer, or LEO, who was under the direction of the head of the Block Office, the Block Development Officer, or BDO. Most of these Block level officers in Jharkhand were higher castes from Bihar. The Ministry was also to provide training for the beneficiaries of collective income generating activities, a revolving fund of Rs25000 as credit to buy

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<sup>52</sup> In Jharkhand (previously part of Bihar) the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRI), that were given constitutional status by passage of the Constitutions (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act of 1992, have not been functioning as there has been no *panchayati* election since 1978. This largely democratically elected, three tier structure of the *gram panchayat* at the village level, the *panchayat samiti* at the Block level, and the *zila parishad* at the District level is, in other states, supposed to be responsible for the design and implementation of development plans all the way down to the village level. In this model, the Block Development Officer and his office are simply implementing or executive agents of the PRIs. However, in Jharkhand, total responsibility of planning and implementation now rests with the Block Development Office.

raw materials and, as a one-off payment to certain groups, money to build training centres, or DWCRA sheds.

In 1998, as part of this developmental process, a Rs2 *lakh* (or Rs200000) cheque arrived in Bero Block to fund the construction of a DWCRA shed. In this chapter I draw on subsequent events to analyse the wider understandings about the practices of the state in the Tapu area. Building on the previous chapter, I propose that the developmental state is understood differently by two groups of local people. The first group includes state officials of the Block Office and the local political elite who are predominantly descendants of the *zamindars* in the area, who may become contractors to Block Schemes. I argue that this local elite has an understanding of the 'idea of the state' as a servant of the people, as the guarantor of a certain social order. They also have a grasp of the more material practices of government in the area. I also argue that understanding the idea of the state does not equate to either an internalisation of, or a commitment to, it. The second group of people includes those who are usually the descendants of the tenants who are predominantly Scheduled Tribe people of Oraon or Munda descent and who I refer to under the generic term 'tribal peasant'. They are people who have a different understanding of the state and see it as alien, not legitimised by their world of spirits, and as dangerous. As such, I argue, the tribal peasants want nothing to do with the state. They do not believe that there could ever be a legitimate state that really acts in the public good, and, therefore, the tribal peasants do not concern themselves with the practices of the state.

I also suggest that a significant reason for the continuation of these two different understandings of the state is that it is in the interest of the local elite to ensure the distinction. Of greatest benefit to the local elite is their continued dominance of local interaction with state and, in particular, the material benefits that they gain in terms of both increased income and maintenance of their patronage status in the local villages. I suggest that, to do this, the local elite 'blocks' the access of others to the resources of the state. This is achieved by perpetuating the idea amongst tribal peasants that the state is so inherently beyond the moral pale that they ought not to engage with it. I also argue,

however, that the power base of the local elite is being challenged by a group of tribal youth. An educated group, these young tribals are increasingly able to imagine the idea of the state as acting for the public good and are subsequently engage in practices of the state.

### **The Events**

A few striking, but unsurprising, facts about DWCRA in Bero Block need to be outlined at the outset. There was no additional village worker. Furthermore, members of the Block Office did not even know about the existence of an elaborate Block DWCRA village worker manual. In fact when I went to New Delhi I found hundreds of DWCRA village worker manuals (published in 1990 in local languages of different Districts) piled high in a backroom of the Ministry of Rural Development – all wrapped and addressed to different Block Offices, just not posted for nine years! Without the additional village worker, the LEO had been given total responsibility for running DWCRA. She was the only female member of the Block Office. The DWCRA files in the Block Office, for which she was responsible, were in complete disorder and largely eaten by white ants. In what was visible, fourteen groups existed on paper and apart from the addition of new groups, nothing in the records changed over time – each month the groups were copied directly from the previous file and any new groups were added.

In Ranchi, the Assistant Project Officer, who supervises DWCRA at the District level, told me that the best thing about Ranchi is that the groups there did not only exist on paper. She said that Bero Block groups, in particular, were doing extremely well with fourteen groups running and four new ones formed that year. She showed me the official records of these new groups, meticulously itemised right down to the details of the number of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste women in each group. Meeting paper targets is of course essential to getting the next instalment of money from higher levels of the Ministry. In fact, in the Bero Block Office, it was commonly acknowledged by all

Block Officers that of the fourteen groups on paper, only two really existed – those in the villages of Pokal Tikra and Karanj Toli.

The Bero Block Office projected the Pokal Tikra group as a model of success. ‘Success’ was measured in terms of the output of group production, not whether they functioned as a group, held meetings or saved money. As such, Pokal Tikra DWCRA women were considered successful because they produced hand-woven carpets. Yet, to official visitors, the LEO and BDO would not mention that the group’s apparent success might in part be attributed to the pre-existence of a hand-woven carpet ‘factory’ run as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) by a woman named Sumani Devi. Whilst Sumani was a descendant of the Maheto caste lineage, the *ex-zamindars* of Pokal Tikra, the DWCRA beneficiaries of Pokal Tikra were all tribal women. They walked two kilometres from the tribal dominated hamlet, Sember, to Pokal Tikra’s main hamlet where Sumani had the handlooms on which they worked. Unsurprisingly, in the fiasco that evolved over the DWCRA shed, Sumani was a central actor.

The Block Office decided that the DWCRA shed should be built in Pokal Tikra as its group was the success. The construction of any building with Block Office resources is a highly politicised affair as it involves a large sum of money on which illicit commissions in a system of ‘percentages’, or ‘*pcs*’, are routine. Money for all programmes arrives from the Ranchi District Office in the form of a cheque made out to the BDO. The contractors receive the money in instalments for which a series of documents have to be signed by various Block Officers. The percentages get taken during the process of signing these documents. In all construction programmes there are two sets of sanctions: the technical and the administrative wings. For example, in the technical wing, the Junior Engineer takes 10%, Assistant Engineer 3%, Executive Engineer 1.5%. The administrative wing includes the BDO who takes 5%; the supervisor 3%; the head clerk 3%; the cashier 2% and the assistant clerk 1.5%.<sup>53</sup> Sometimes, if they feel that the

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<sup>53</sup> The percentages are fixed slightly differently for different schemes. The two main construction schemes in the time I was there were Employment Assurance Scheme and *Jawahar Rozgar Yojna*. Assistant

scheme can be done at an even lower price, the cuts are higher. All in all, approximately 30% of the money for the scheme goes to the Block Office staff. These 'systems of mediation' are significant in making the resource-poor DWCRA scheme a low priority for Block Officers and other mediators. However, when Pokal Tikra was chosen as a site for the Rs2 *lakh* DWCRA centre, the DWCRA became a focus of attention in and around the Block Office.

To commission a construction project, the Block Office must hold a meeting in the village concerned. Here, all villagers have the opportunity to vote, in the presence of some of the Block Officers, for the villager who is to be responsible as the contractor for the building. Officially contractors get paid at the rate of only Rs50-60<sup>54</sup> a day for the length of the project. However, as all the money for the construction comes in cheques addressed to the contractor, and he or she largely determines how this money is spent, potential contractors can expect to siphon off up to 10% of the total sum allocated to the project. Such cuts are made possible through corner cutting during construction, for example, by the use of poor quality materials, the digging of shallower foundations than proposed in the estimate, or by accounting for twice as many labourers as those who actually worked. The latter is achieved by getting each labourer to thumbprint sign for two days payment for every one they worked. Thus, at the village level, the benefit of becoming a contractor is considerable.

Many of the Pokal Tikra villagers claim that the carpet factory leader, Sumani Devi, tried to hide the date of the meeting, so that on the day voters selected by her would all vote for her chosen candidate. However, she was unsuccessful and the meeting was held in the presence of the BDO and most of the villagers. Although Sumani's proposed candidate stood in election, another man from Pokal Tikra was elected as the contractor to build the shed.

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Engineers and Executive Engineers come from the Ranchi District Office if the project is above Rs2 *lakh* and they take their own set commission too.

<sup>54</sup> The amount varied over the time I did fieldwork from Rs50 in 1999 to Rs60 in 2002.

In the few days after this election, Sumani approached the BDO to protest against the results. She claimed that the selection had been unfair because the BDO had supported the elected contractor. The latter was locally known to be a worker of the then Congress Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Bero area, with whom it was in the BDO's interest to maintain good relations as it may determine his next transfer.<sup>55</sup> Sumani claimed that the chosen contractor was also someone with whom the Block Officers could easily reinforce the systems of percentages (commission-taking), and with whom the rent-seeking BDO could negotiate a particularly good *pagdi*, a bribe, for the commissioning of the project. She also declared that the chosen contractor really wanted the DWCRA building to be constructed on his land so that eventually he could take it over as a drinking and smoking club for men. This, in her view, typified the attitude of men in the area in relation to the progress of women. In contrast, Sumani argued that she was the only person actively involved in the welfare of Pokal Tikra women, and, as such, that the shed should be built on her land where DWCRA women were already weaving carpets.

The BDO denied these allegations and said that the decision had been taken on just grounds. He urged Sumani to stop interfering in other peoples' affairs and added that, in any case, she was an outsider. Pokal Tikra was her mother's place, to which she had

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<sup>55</sup> I do not have exact information on the way this dependence works in Bero Block Office, but Robert Wade's (1982; 1985) model of the corruption-transfer mechanism in Andhra Pradesh provides pointers that are certainly relevant to Bero. He explains that bureaucrats of the Indian government departments are eligible for transfer to a new post every three years. Different posts have different degrees of desirability usually linked with the amount of money going into the region thus making the price offered for the post, equal to that amount expected to be earned in the post. Wade suggests that depending on the strength of the governing party and the influence of the local MLA, politicians can be actively involved in the transfer system and usually participate in auctioning posts. They are one of the main means by which officers can influence their posting and for villagers to exert influence on their government officers. The politicians, in return, will be able to endure the cost of maintaining themselves as the dominant party as they will get a certain number of contracts from the bureaucrats, and from the villagers, a certain percentage of benefits. The circuit of transactions is thus that the bureaucracy acquires the control of funds, that are channelled upwards to higher ranks and politicians by paying for transfers, and the politicians can then use the funds for short-term material inducements in exchange for electoral support (Wade, 1985).

returned after a broken marriage. Moreover, she was not poor, and as such should have no role in DW CRA whose beneficiaries as defined by the Ministry were supposed to be BPL, 'Below Poverty Line'.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the BDO argued that the real reason for Sumani's anger was that she wanted to build the shed on her own land as an extension to her own house.

Sumani, not winning on any fronts, mobilised some of the people of the tribal dominated hamlet, Sember, to protest. Sember villagers were largely tribal and were descendants of the *zamindar* of Pokal Tikra. Like Sumani, villagers living in the main hamlet were all higher caste and descendants of the different factions of the old landlord lineage. In fact many Sember people still work as labourers on the lands of the wealthier Pokal Tikra villagers including those of the elected contractor. Building upon her links as an employer of some of the Sember women, she mobilised Sember families to strike from agricultural labour in Pokal Tikra for fifteen days. Although not fully successful in her mission, she caused substantial problems to the contractor, and promised further inconveniences.

Despite the protest, the work on the shed began on schedule. The contractor received a first cheque of Rs7500, which was followed by a second one of Rs30000. Yet, as the foundations were dug, Sumani arranged for some Sember villagers to sabotage the work by refilling the excavations with stone. Angered by Sumani's activities, the contractor threatened to file a labour court case against Sumani for preventing the Sember labourers working on Pokal Tikra land.

The confrontation worsened. One night, soon after the stone-filling incident, a group of armed men arrived at the contractor's house and beat him and two of his family

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<sup>56</sup> At the beginning of each Plan period (i.e. every five years), the Ministry of Rural Development conducts a census to establish the poorest families so that they can be targeted for development efforts under the Integrated Rural Development Scheme (IRDP). The poor families identified are termed as 'Below Poverty Line', or BPL. The categorisation itself is a highly politicised affair which locally powerful individuals can influence.



members. The raiders claimed they were part of the extreme left wing Naxal group, the Maoist Communist Centre, or MCC. Pokal Tikra villagers were scared. The rumour was that Sumani was certainly behind these latest developments, as it was well known that her father was an active communist supporter. In the meantime Sumani had taken a troop of about 30 women from Sember to the Deputy Development Commissioner and District Commissioner in Ranchi to complain against the BDO's moves to commission the shed to an inappropriate contractor in Pokal Tikra.

Deterred by these developments, the BDO (in whose hands the ultimate authority of all decisions at the Block level remained), wanted to cancel the project all together. His strategy was to feign ignorance about the 'real' conditions of the 'model' DWCR group. To do so he would stage an official visit by the LEO, so that the Block Office would discover, for the first time, the group's failure to function under the terms set by the New Delhi guidelines.

In general the LEO had some sympathy for Sumani's position. Sumani was, after all, correct that the carpet weaving in Pokal Tikra was situated at her premises. However, the LEO did not support Sumani in her fight against the BDO as her job and position were in turn dependent on the maintenance of good relations with the BDO. The LEO was a Bihari Kayastha woman in her mid 40s who was content with her secure government job and was not interested in becoming involved in Block Office politics and its illicit practices. She had a family of three daughters and saw her role as a mother as a priority. Her husband had a well paid and secure post with the Heavy Engineering Cooperation in Hatia, and so all she needed from her job was her salary. She therefore maintained a low profile within the Block Office. She went in to the office on only two of the five required days, and did not take responsibility for any of the large-scale construction projects. Most Block Officers, in contrast, sought involvement in these projects due to the illicit revenue they could accumulate. In her own work, however, the LEO even left all her monetary duties to her assistant clerk. This policy of keeping to the margins was mutually beneficial to both the LEO and the BDO. She let the BDO and other officers go about their business without interfering, whilst the BDO, in turn,

covered up for her absences. For instance, if there were enquiries or unplanned visits by higher level officers to the Block Office, the excuse was always used that the LEO was in the field.

So, when it came to the issue of Sumani and the shed, the LEO acted as the BDO wished and her visit to Pokal Tikra was unannounced. I accompanied her on this occasion. We parked outside Sumani's 'NGO'. The building consisted of one big room with two handlooms at which several Oraon women were working – none of the women were recognisable to the LEO. The LEO asked for the group leader of DWCRA. The women looked scared, did not reply and continued working without taking their eyes off the looms. The LEO, agitated, said to them, 'Can you people not even answer guests who have come from outside?' On this, one of the women went shouting for Sumani. The LEO reacted, 'Sumani is not your group leader. Sumani is nothing to do with DWCRA.' Eventually Sumani welcomed us with Moti Devi, the alleged leader of the carpet-weaving group. The next hour that passed saw an explosion of accusations between the LEO and Sumani.

The LEO had presented the visit as a routine one (when in fact it was her first) to see how the group was getting on. She attempted to direct all talk towards Moti Devi while ignoring Sumani. Moti was asked for her files, which she finally found. On inspection, the LEO was unsurprised to discover that no entry had been made since the day the file was issued. From then on, all the LEO's criticisms were focused around how terrible the group was because it had not maintained its files. She stressed that file maintenance was the central feature of their responsibilities as DWCRA beneficiaries, since the files were not kept, there was no evidence that the group existed. Moti stood looking scared and nervous, and nodded at everything the LEO said.

Sumani, however, rose against these claims. She asked how Moti could know how to maintain the files if the LEO had never shown her. She attacked the LEO for acting like all state workers and frightening the women, not caring about them, never coming to see them, and not explaining how the DWCRA should work. She pointed out that the focus

of DWCRA was not file maintenance but income generation. It was the LEO who was supposed to spend time getting to know a group of women, slowly discovering their problems, exploring with them ways to overcome these problems, and then advising them on how they could collectively become involved in income generating activities. Sumani said that when she had heard that DWCRA was coming to Bero, she had thought it would be a sweet dream, and that the women would progress and develop, but in practice none of this had happened.

The LEO protested at Sumani's attacks. She said that she knew very well the theory of how DWCRA should work and went on to defend herself by portraying her position as a helpless woman. She argued that without being provided with a car, she was restricted to visiting road-side villages where buses went, and that it was not safe for her to go to 'interior places' (of which she considered Pokal Tikra one). She said that she would not put her family or her home at risk for DWCRA. Sumani argued against this. She drew on her own situation to demonstrate how much a person could achieve if they were determined to do so. She said that she was a voluntary worker, who unlike the LEO, enjoyed neither official power nor a state salary. She pointed out that despite these restraints she still found the time, energy and resources to work for the development of poor tribal women.

The heated argument escalated. The LEO told Sumani that she had no right to interfere and tell her what her duty was as an LEO. She argued that Sumani was in fact exploiting DWCRA women, as well as others, as labourers in her factory. She described Sumani's actions as '*suction*' (a word deriving from 'sucking' and indicating weakening by exploitation), thus revealing her awareness, all along, that the DWCRA group had never really existed.<sup>57</sup> Sumani did not deny the allegation that DWCRA women were working for her as labourers. She argued that at least her 'factory' provided a job for the women that was a source of income. This, she argued, was far more important than a state

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<sup>57</sup> Of interest here is that the LEO had told me earlier that DWCRA was in fact unrealistic in its designs and that a more appropriate project for the development of poor women would simply be a factory where they could work as labourers for a daily wage.

programme in which women were not properly informed and which only really existed on paper. This was evidenced, she argued, by the fact that the daughter of another DWCRA group leader cycled 45 minutes every day to work as a labourer on the Pokal Tikra looms.

When we finally left, the LEO was angry. She had, however, accomplished the task she had been sent to do. She had “officially” uncovered that the DWCRA group was not functioning in accordance with Ministerial guidelines, and that the blame for all this lay with Sumani’s interference and ‘exploitation’. Further, if the Pokal Tikra group was disbanded and the women moved to another village, perhaps for a new income generating activity, then there would be no reason for a DWCRA shed to be built in Pokal Tikra, and the matter of the shed could be dropped once and for all.

In this way the contractor was subsequently told to stop his construction work and the BDO put the DWCRA shed on hold. When I returned for further fieldwork in 2000, the shed, like many others, remained in an incomplete state.

### **Elaborating on the DWCRA Shed**

The story of the shed is one of at least seven in-depth cases I recorded, during my fieldwork, about the implementation of the construction contracts of Block Development Office schemes. Two common themes run through each of these cases. The first is that different local people have different understandings of the state. In particular, the local political elite on the one hand (people like Sumani), and the mass of the tribal peasant population on the other hand (people such as the tribal women who were working on the looms), have divergent understandings of the state. The second theme is that these divergent understandings impact upon, and reinforce, the differentiated interactions that local people have with the state. In the following section I explore these understandings and practices, as well as their interrelations.

### **The political elite understandings**

People like Sumani and the competing contractor are part of the local political elite, and are normally descendants of *zamindar* or ex-revenue collecting families. They are often depicted in literature on the state as ‘mediators’, ‘intermediaries’, or ‘brokers’, blurring the boundary between the state and society (cf Neocleous, 1996; Gupta, 1995; 1998). Unlike Sumani, who was regarded locally as a peculiar exception, most such mediators in the Bero area are men.

As I set out in the introduction, these elites associate *sarkar*, the local term for the state, with both elected politicians (the legislative wing of the state) and bureaucratic state officials (the executive wing of the state) but are able to differentiate between the two. Moreover, they also differentiate the activities of the different local level state offices, such as the Forest Office, the Police and the Block Office. In fact, they make it their business to know about the practices of the state. This is not to imply, however, that they always know what state officials or state schemes are supposed to do in terms of New Delhi, or Ranchi, guidelines. Nor does it imply that state planning is itself coherent or unitary. Rather, it is to say that they always try to gain an understanding of the official and unofficial possibilities of state functioning.

The local elite believe that a good understanding of the procedures of the state can enable them to more readily accrue the benefits it potentially offers. As argued in Chapter 2, the direct and indirect benefits of the state provide a central means through which many *zamindar* descendants attempt to maintain their wealth. In this way Block Development Office contracts are particularly important as involvement in their implementation offers the potential to accrue significant financial gain through illicitly siphoning off funds. Accruing state benefits also offers *zamindar* descendants the opportunity to maintain their patronage status. For example, Block Development Schemes provide a means through which an ex-*zamindar* can contract village labour. In most cases, labourers feel indebted to the contractors as they perceive them to be the

patrons of projects on which relatively higher salaries can be earned.<sup>58</sup> This is because the tribal peasants usually see the Block Development projects as those of particular contractors, rather than as of the *sarkar*. Voting is a symbolic, albeit contested, process of securing *ex-zamindar* wealth and status. Even though the villagers, who become labourers, have a vote in who becomes a contractor, the process of voting remains in, and reinforces, the village hierarchies to the extent that labourers feel indebted to the contractors they have elected. In this respect, contractorship to Block Development Office schemes are particularly attractive to those in the elite (often young men) who are trying to build their own legitimacy (as opposed to their father's) as village patrons. The schemes offer the chance to provide labour in the village and to accumulate once-off savings through the illicit profits of implementation.

As is clear in the story of the DWCRAs, tension and conflict over state resources exist between members of the elite. Block Development Office contracts are few, there is much competition for them, and it is difficult to secure the outcome. Many members of the elite are competing to gain the benefits of state involvement. In this contest, the best way to become a contractor is to join the network of young men in Bero who are well acquainted with state activities and who have well developed relationships with state officials. These local men are usually also linked to branches of a political party, whose most prominent personnel attempt to win seats in the Legislative Assembly every five years. In supporting a particular candidate, therefore, the assumption is that, if the candidate wins, they will use their political influence over state officials to distribute government development contracts to their supporters.

To become part of these networks young men frequent the streets, restaurants and shops of Bero. They build personalised relations with those 'in the know', and develop the skill of being in the right place at the right time (to ensure involvement in a project). In some of the literature these young men, loitering in the streets of Bero, are described as 'unemployed' or '*berozgar*' (cf: Heuze, 1996; Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffery, 2002). Indeed, these young men might sometimes classify themselves to state, development

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<sup>58</sup> Government scheme labour rates are usually at least Rs15 more a day than labour rates in the village.

officials, or even the short-term researcher, as *berozgar*. And there is a sense in which they understand their own activities to be a consequence of not having *naukri* or formal employment, despite a school education. However, most of these young men also see their networking in Bero as a form of employment that gains additional livelihood from activities of the state. This is 'employment' that only involves a few hours in an otherwise long and active day. For most of the day these young men are involved in farming activities back in their respective villages.

Whilst the ultimate objective is to accrue benefits from the state, hobnobbing in the restaurants of Bero is not solely for economic gain. For many young men this is also a welcome break, and an exciting and interesting change, from the more boring and mundane village environment. Indeed, it is seen as a challenge to become accepted in the new network of politically motivated people, to acquire status within it, and to form one's own alliances. Whereas back in the village, as descendants of *zamindars*, their status is more immediately secured by birth, in the new community of 'worldly' actors in Bero, young men have to secure their credibility and position in the 'new' and bigger field of predominantly *ex-zamindars*. There is a recognition that to be successful one has to be shrewd, intelligent and have the capacity to transcend the confines of being just an 'innocent village lad'. Moreover, one has to have the ability to 'do' 'politics' to secure *sarkari* benefits, as politics is seen as an activity intimately entwined with the state.

As in both Ruud's (2001) account of politics in a Bengali village and Goldman's (2001) study in Bahia, Brazil, politics was seen by my elite informants as a somewhat 'dirty' activity. This was not only because it involved tactful and often cunning alliance building, but also because it involved secrecy, caution and the potential to stab one's own allies in the back if they became a potential threat. For this reason, doing politics was also seen as dangerous.

While many young men of *zamindar* descent test out their ability to do politics, most of my elite informants felt that it required particular strength and intelligence to be successful and that eventually only a few people continued to be involved in political

networks. To many, doing politics was thus seen as an activity that was transitory and transient - an experience of a particular stage in life, after which it would be time to move on and settle down to a more 'harmonious and peaceful' village or town existence.

There is a definite sense in which these elite informants have an understanding of the abstract idea that the state, *sarkar*. That is that, through its unmediated relationship with an undifferentiated citizenry, the state is a servant of the people, the guarantor of a certain social order, and a power above partial interests. Indeed in the case of the Block Office, this understanding of state ideal is clarified as the role of serving the poor. However, there are two vital aspects common to such understandings. First, that understandings are not necessarily followed by an internalisation of state ideas. Second, that they are not necessarily followed by a commitment to these ideas.

This lack of internalisation and commitment is exemplified by the discourses and practices of corruption. For instance in the construction schemes of the Bero Block Office, there are three main types of extra-legal activities that Block Officers are engaged in: the giving and taking of *chai-pani*;<sup>59</sup> the *pagdi*; and the *pc* or percentage. Indeed, Parry (2000) provides a useful distinction between the gift, the bribe and the commission. In the Bero area, my local political elite and state official informants were in no doubt that such activities were illegal. Indeed, their conception of legality was founded on the understanding that the rule of law protects the abstract idea of the state as a power above partial interests. However, though illicit, these informants did not judge

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<sup>59</sup> *Chai-pani* literally means tea-water but it usually indicates food and drink that are bought for the officers. These can range from tea, a box of mangos or sweets to bottles of alcohol. Less commonly, and then more so for higher officers, the gift can extend to presents of suiting material or *sarees* for officer's wives. In many cases it is often money that transfers hands for the purpose of buying the proposed items rather than the actual items. However, the transaction is never depicted as a direct monetary one and always as one of things. As Yan succinctly describes in the Xiajia case, the exchange is conditioned by existing power relations whereby the recipient (officer) gains prestige because the exchange shows that he or she possesses resources that are in demand to attract gifts. Moreover, it indicates the donor's perception of the recipient as someone who can be bought off and the recipient's acceptance of such an identity (Yan, 1996: 171).



their extra-legal acts of corruption as morally wrong. Rather, in as far as it was important in the discourse of corruption, morality was judged in the context of other values such as those of caste, negotiability, gift giving, hierarchy and greediness.

For example, of all the acts of corruption, gift giving was regarded as the least morally reprehensible. This was not only because the gift was seen as part of a broader social system of maintaining relations between people, but also because it was considered as a transaction willingly engaged in. In contrast, the bribe was rarely voluntary on the part of the donor, and thus its giving was accompanied by resentment. Furthermore, the bribe's negotiability engendered feelings of unethical practice, especially if one had to give more than others. From the point of view of the Block Officers, the bribe was also the most morally condemned transaction. This was because only the BDO could take this transaction and, as such, the bribe was not only a payment but also a marker of the BDO's higher socio-political status within the Block Office hierarchy. In fact, in accounts of the Bero Block history, particular BDO's were reputed to be 'good' precisely because they rarely took the *pagdi*.

The commissions, the third form of payment, are a fixed, non-negotiable, percentage of the value of a development scheme. These are given by contractors to different Block Officers involved in the implementation of a scheme. As a result, the percentage is expected and contracted in a manner that is so 'matter-of-fact', that it is rarely considered morally wrong. Indeed, it is in the logic of treating *pcs* as the norm that acts that deviate from what is considered normal, or 'fair', are deemed morally wrong. For example, if a Block Officer were to try to take more than his allocated percentage, he would most likely be regarded as greedy. Yet if an officer did not take his or her allocated percentage he/she may be regarded with respect, not because of acting legally, but because people who are not greedy are usually praised. In a similar vein, if a contractor tried to get away without paying the commission, he would himself be considered as immoral. This would also hold for those that escape payment due to having caste or kinship relations with the officer concerned.

A similar discourse is employed to explain the fact that a contractor will normally pocket up to 10% of the costs of any given scheme. On the one hand, the act is realised as illegal. Money made from contractor cuts is considered to result from '*do number kam*' (second number work), which is distinct from legal *ek* (or first) number work, because it is thought to be a secondary type of work that involves illegal activity. Indeed *do number kam* is understood to result in *do number paisa* (illegal money). On the other hand, however, *do number kam* is not condemned by the local political elite for its illegality. In fact, when elections for contractors occur, a most common statement circulating amongst the elite is that it is useless to vote for x as he will have no idea how to make a cut on the money he is allocated.

These days, as the number of potential village contractors rises, there is a trend towards rival contractors condemning each other for using *do number paisa* selfishly. As a result, competing local political elites now pressurise contractors to divert as much of their cuts as possible to other common village causes, especially as donations for religious celebrations.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it is now common to hear contractors complaining that, 'between the demands of state officials and those of (particular) villagers, there is no longer a livelihood from contracting' (Mosse, 2001: 190, fn 47).

These politics of corruption were clearly played out in Tapu. In Tapu contractors who got particular schemes had to contribute money to the building of a Hanuman Temple. Block Office schemes were rarely seen to benefit a majority of the villagers. For instance a preschool building was more commonly used as a place to house wedding guests, a pond was seen to irrigate only Popat Odhar and his brother's land, a dirt road to the river stopped 100 metres from the stretch where it was most required, the stretch that became a marsh in the rainy season. Of importance to the village elite was not the projects themselves, as these were usually considered to be of little use, but instead the way in which the contractor's cut was spent. Indeed, the elite let the contractors take the

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<sup>60</sup> This has been the case in other parts of India too. Mosse notes in Tamil Nadu that income from tank-fish and trees, controlled by village contractor-leaders, are mostly accounted for by spending on temples and hardly ever on tank repair or other public goods (Mosse, 2001).

cut but pressurised them to contribute to the 'betterment' of the village and, in doing so, purify '*do number*' money into '*ek number*' sums. In this way several of the contractors in Tapu contributed to building the village's Hanuman Temple. In practice, of course, these donations did not necessarily get used as intended. Indeed there were all sorts of stories describing how the temple funds themselves were embezzled, albeit under the disguise of 'religious', as opposed to 'state' development.

The local political elite clearly lack, therefore, an internalization of, and a commitment to, the idea of the state. Moreover, there is also a sense in which some individuals lack a commitment to the state as it actually *is*. This was perhaps most symbolically described in Tapu by Neel who, discussing the preschool he had built with a contract from a Block Development Office scheme, said it was '*sarkar ka lippa putti*.' In the Bero area, *lippa putti* is the conventional white clay covering of mud walls, and the cow-dung and mud covering of mud floors. To many of the elite, who prefer more resilient painted brick and cement structures, *lippa putti* is a messy cover that hides unresilient and poor quality structures (mud houses). Neel's point was that the pre-school building symbolised the rhetoric of 'public good and development of the poor' but was, in fact, just a cover up for an inefficient and corrupt state. Neel and many of his friends in Bero thus characterised many of the understandings of, and internalisations with, the state that the elite in the Bero area held and took part in. On the one hand, they would plot about how to acquire the next government development contract, whilst on the other hand endlessly intellectualising about, and criticising the present state for not working in the interests of the poor, for involving too many mediators and for essentially being corrupt.

### **The tribal peasant understandings**

The tribal women who were worked in Sumani's factory were clearly not part of this local political elite. Instead, they were part of a broader group of mainly tribal peasants in the area who were the descendants of tenants. They understood that '*sarkar*' consisted of the executive wing of the state - the civil service. While they were aware of some of the differences between, for example, the Police, the Forest Office and the Block Office, they did not seek to know more about these workings of the state. Moreover, as I will

elaborate in the next chapter, unlike the political elite, tribal peasants did not consider MLAs, elected state representatives, as being *sarkari*.

As a consequence, the tribal women of the factory were afraid of the LEO and did not want to interact with her. They identified her as a Bihari (like most of the Block Officers), as a city woman, and thus as a foreigner. Furthermore, arriving in a blue jeep, she was unmistakably associated with the state. As I have argued, the women understood the state as something to be afraid of and to keep away from. Indeed in Tapu, on the several occasions that a state jeep turned up, tribal people, and especially women, would literally rush into their houses, sweep their children in, and close the door. Some *zamindar* descendant say that in the past these fears were much stronger but, now that the local area is changing and the tribal peasants are more 'aware', they have become less fearful. However, when I arrived to live in Tapu many of the Mundas were suspicious that I was an officer of the state, especially perhaps because on an earlier visit I had been with a Forest Officer from Ranchi. As such, many Mundas would walk away from me so that at first it seemed that only the *zamindar* descendants welcomed me to the village, and even then, only because they thought I could provide them with material benefits, as the EIRFP community organiser had done before me.

One day when Jego Munda, who repeatedly turned his back on me, did so once more, I pleaded with him not to do so and asked him why he treated me in that way. At that point he turned around. He was sweating, his eyes were blood-shot and he was fuming at the mouth. He screamed at me, 'what do you want from us? Who are you? We don't believe you are not *sarkari*. You are lying to us! All you want to do is our 'suction'.' Aware of these beliefs, I was careful to limit my interaction with people outside the village, as well as the *zamindar* descendants, in front of the Mundas. Yet, and despite the fact I lived in a Munda courtyard, it took many months to convince the staunchest sceptics that I was in fact just like one of their sons or daughters who migrate to the kilns, but that my labour was my study of them. In fact, Jego only changed his attitude towards me when my parents arrived to stay in the village and gave every house a box of

*mithai*, sweets. He came to my house, for the very first time, and offered a brass pot of fresh milk from his buffalo as an appeasement.

One of the main reasons for this fear of the state was the belief that it was part of the 'outside and foreign' world, and hence that it was dangerous, unpredictable, untrustworthy and best kept away from. These understandings were reinforced by the fact that the state was comprised mainly of Biharis who were mostly higher castes, and the perception that these outsiders sought to exploit and weaken tribal peasants. Moreover, unlike the local *ex-zamindars*, these *sarkari* officials had no legitimacy in the tribal world of spirits (Chapter 2).

Most tribal peasants were not sure about when the state had come to the area. There was speculation that it had been brought by the *Angrez*, the British. And, there was also speculation about whether the Ratu *Maharajah* had been a part of the state and whether he had colluded with it. Most commonly, however, it was thought that the state was a new and recent invasion that had become increasingly visible, powerful and potent as a threat to tribal society. For instance, the state was seen to have created rules for registering tribal lands, it had taken rights over their forests, and it could arrest and fine people who did not obey its rules. It had Police Officers who could jail people in Ranchi. It allowed outsiders to build houses on public lands, but did not allow tribal people to farm them. And most importantly, as I argue in the next chapter, the state was seen to have weakened tribal society by attempting to destroy its sacred tribal *parha*, that kept the tribe strong, harmonious and united. As such, tribal peasants thus did not accept idea that the state could serve the public good. Instead, it was understood as a tool of exploitation. Indeed, as discussed, a common term used by tribal peasants to describe *sarkar* was 'suction'.

Of further concern to tribal peasants were the ways in which the state was attempting to become more acceptable to tribal society. Block Development Officers, in particular, bore resentment for this. For, whilst the Forest Officers and Police, who fined and locked up tribal peasants, were exploitative and violent in visible ways, the Block

Development Officers were seen to disguise their destructive capacity in their language of acting in the interests of the 'poor'. For instance, tribal peasants would often sceptically comment on the roads being built around Tapu, which they saw as, 'only bringing *chor*, thieves.'

An inherent obstacle to Block Development Office legitimacy in the eyes of tribal peasants is its failure to take account of the tribal peasant ethos of consumption. Consider, for example, the selective distribution of housing grants to people identified as 'Below Poverty Line' by the Block Development Office as part of the *Indira Awas* Scheme. Despite the fact that many tribal peasants in Tapu were eligible, few showed any desire to secure access to this money. Indeed, even when an intermediate party had allocated grants directly to the tribal peasants, there was a reluctance to accept them. For instance, four Maheli families, identified by the EIRFP as some of the poorest in Tapu, were each given contracts under the *Indira Awas* Scheme, through the mediation of the EIRFP which wanted to show to its designers that it was making links with the state. However, five years later, not one of the families had built new houses. To the Project Community Organisers this was further evidence that Mahelis had no interest in their own development, and were far more interested in drinking. However, this was to miss the point that their reluctance to consume was symptomatic of not wanting to publicly create distinction between themselves and other Mahelis. Indeed, and holding parallels to Gell's (1987) account of the Muria Gonds of Bastar, in all acts of consumption it was important for the Mahelis to publicly express a collective identity. Hence, in Tapu, unless state resources were distributed to all, tribal peasants usually showed little interest in obtaining these material resources for themselves, as these would publicly differentiate them from each other. As a consequence, where accepted, such resources were often not used. The many empty *Indira Awas* houses in the Bero landscape exemplify this. Or, if used, as in one case I came to know, the beneficiary of a brick house might convert it with mud and white clay so that it came to resemble the rest of the mud houses in the village.

The strength of this ethic of consumption is also reaffirmed by the occasions in which tribal peasants have accepted resources from the state. Here closer investigation demonstrates that it is often under the influence of the local political elite that tribals accept resources, an elite influence that is driven by their desires to pocket a proportion of the 'Below Poverty Line' resources in the process. In fact, and most strikingly, tribal peasants in these circumstances often believed that the resources came not from state but from the elite themselves. For instance, the tribal women of the DWCRA group, were unaware that they were the main Bero Block beneficiaries of a state-run DWCRA programme. Instead, they believed that they were simply labourers in Sumani's factory, a woman who coincidentally had regular contact with the state and other outsiders about her factory and their work. In other cases, tribal peasants, albeit always through the encouragement and mediation of the political elite, sometimes accessed state resources for what they saw as compensation for damage created by the state.

Juxtaposed with these experiences of the state, the superior status of the tribal *parha* was reinforced for the tribal people by the fact that material resources could never be gained from it. This point was reinforced in discussions I had with tribal people in Tapu about the benefits of the *parha*. At first I was surprised by the commonly held that, 'of course there is no *faida* (benefit) from the *parha*'. Indeed I would ask, 'then what use is the *parha*?,' to which I would be given a look of shock and disbelief, 'how dare you ask that question!' Upon repeated discussion with Karia Munda and Jatrubaba, I later realised the interpretive problem. The word '*faida*' was understood by tribal people to mean material resources, and the worst thing the *parha* could stand for was material benefits. This was because such functions were associated with the state, and were an indication of its inherently destructive capacity. In essence, by giving to some, and not to all, the Block Office was seen to differentiate amongst tribal society through consumption, and hence to enhance the potential for division amongst tribal people.

Given a choice, tribal peasants prefer to have nothing to do with the state and its officials, and expect nothing from them. Fearful of the state, tribal peasants prefer to leave contact with the state to the *zamindar* descendants, or political elite, who, as

argued in Chapter 2, hold legitimacy in the village as patrons and as protectors of the tribal spiritual world. As such, tribal peasants have little faith in the idea that the state serves the public good and, as far as possible, they wish not to interact with it. As a consequence, tribal peasants rarely acquire the kinds of knowledge that (some) members of the local elite accumulate, and are thus unaware of the details of state operations at the local level.

### **The political economy of understandings**

In the two preceding sections, I have shown that there are two groups of people at the local level. The first is the local political elite who understand (though often don't internalise) that the idea of the state is to serve the public good. They also understand, however, that the reality of state processes at the local level is somewhat different, and are both unable and unwilling to interact within these processes. In fact, in many senses, the boundaries between the local political elite and the state officials are highly porous. The second group is comprised of the tribal peasants who do not believe that the state can serve the public good and who thus seek to avoid contact with it.

Through this differentiation, local elites monopolise access to the state and, in so doing, the resources the state distributed to 'develop the poor'. As I have argued, their main reasons for doing so are to gain an alternative sources of wealth, and to enhance their patron status to the tribal peasants. As I have also shown, state, and in particular, Block Office resources are most often captured by exclusive networks of state officers and political elites. Indeed, this exclusivity, and the misinterpretations it encourages about the roles and practices of the state, is central to local control of the state resources by members of the elite. Moreover, although difficult to evidence, it is possible that the local elite utilizes and plays on the understandings of tribal peasants in order to reinforce and further their capture of state resources.

In this regard in Tapu, some of the *zamindar* descendants would quite willingly joke to me about the stupidity of tribal beliefs about the exploitative state. However, in front of the tribal peasants, they would perpetuate the notion of an exploitative, corrupt monolith



that it was better to stay away from. Indeed, members of the elite appeared to realise that the discourse of state corruption and exploitation was an important narrative to reinforce and, even exaggerate.

For example, early one morning in Tapu, as all the men of the village gathered on the hill outside our house for a regular village meeting called by Darshan, Popat and Neel, two uniformed Forest Guards arrived in the village. They were greeted by the *zamindar* descendants and promptly went with them to find Somra Maheli, a tenant descendant, who had not turned up to the meeting. About a quarter of an hour later, the Officers and the *zamindar* descendants returned with Somra. One of the Officers was shouting at him and holding him by the ear. Somra looked horrified, and was literally shaking and shivering. It transpired that Forest Guards had been informed, by some unnamed source, that Somra had been cutting trees from the jungle where coppicing was not allowed. After shouting at Somra in front of the village gathering, the Officers took him to the Forest Office in Bero. He was told to sit for a few hours and then, after being threatened that he would have to pay a fine, he was released.

The peculiar thing about this visit was its timing. It almost appeared as if the Officers had gathered in the village knowing that they would have an audience and a stage on which to perform. Indeed, later I found out that Neel and Popat had informed the Forest Officers of Somra Maheli's alleged crime, and had asked them to come to the village at a time when they knew that he could be humiliated in front of many other tenant descendants. It is most possible that they hoped that this would drive fear of the *sarkar* into those present. Indeed, whilst both Neel and Popat appeared to take great pleasure in the event and later laughed about it, back in our courtyard that day, Neel was stressing to Etwa and Somra Munda how it was so unnecessary for the *sarkari* officers to behave in that manner. In fact, he even argued that the officers were really only interested in doing people's *suction*.

My proposition here, therefore, is that *zamindar* descendants understand that their goal of monopolising state resources is enabled by, if not dependent upon, a clear

differentiation between the honest, innocent, and illiterate insiders (the tribal peasants), and the corrupt, exploitative and immoral outsiders (the state and its agents). As a consequence, at least part of the explanation for why tribal peasants continue to hold their viewpoint of the state, as irredeemably foreign and polluted, is that it has been in the interest of the local elite to propagate and reinforce this understanding. Indeed, this context holds strong parallels with Bailey's account of Orissa, one in which middlemen are shown to gain by fostering misunderstanding between local community members and outside officials (Bailey, 1969: 169).

These different local understandings of the state, as well as their reproduction, holds important implications. For, even if development programmes are made more participatory and decentralised (the objective of not only in many Block Development schemes, but also in those promoted by NGOs and international agencies) there can be little assurance that local people will really be better served. This is because, as Mosse (1996) also points out, the local level community is not a homogenous entity. Instead, given that it is differentiated by cultural groups, understandings, and hierarchies of power, dominant local interests are likely to shape the way in which development programmes are implemented locally.

### **Concluding Remarks: Changing Power Structures**

As I have shown, local state officials and the local political elite are interested in the Block Office because they can gain illicit resources from it. To do so they collude with each other, and blur the boundary of the state and society in order to control access to state resources. A central aspect of this collusion is the process through which the local elites attempt to control local understandings of the idea of the state and the practices of the state. I have proposed that this collusion is effective. Indeed, I have suggested that it serves to reinforce tribal peasant beliefs that the state is unable to serve the public good. Moreover, assuming that the state is another form of external exploitation, I have

suggested that tribal peasants are encouraged to keep away from the state, and to continue to hold little interest in its procedures and 'workings'.

In this context, it is more likely that changes to local power structures will effect changes in tribal beliefs than initiatives that encourage decentralisation and/or participation per se. Indeed, in the past it was even easier for locally powerful elites to encourage particular understandings of the state amongst the tribal peasants as they had greater control over tribal access to, and hence perceptions of, foreign agencies.

In recent years, however, greater numbers of tribal people have sought to enjoy middle class lifestyles and political elite status. The seeds of these changes were evident in the pre-independence period when Christianisation of tribal peasants increased their access to education and led to the emergence of a small tribal middle class. More recently the developmental state has also created opportunities for education of tribal people.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, whilst in much of the Bero Block area, this expansion of the developmental state has had, as might have been expected, a disproportionately beneficial effect for the political elite, it has offered some tribal people, previously confined to village and kinship based networks, the opportunity to move out into the previously 'foreign' world of the state and the middle class. In so doing, this emerging tribal middle class has gained the potential to view society in new ways, and in particular the potential to

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<sup>61</sup> It has also created reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in government. Legislations on behalf of India's SCs and STs were passed in 1943 and 1950, respectively (Galanter, 1984: 86). A system of compensatory discrimination was meant to last until 1960 and no longer by when the economic uplift of the country's poorest and most 'backward' communities was envisioned to be complete. The enabling legislation was duly re-enacted at the end of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The Second Backward Classes Commission report (1979-1980) chaired by Mandal advised that a system of reserved jobs in central government could usefully be extended from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes of India (roughly 15 and 7.5 % of the population, respectively) to embrace a broader collection of Socially and Economically Backward Classes. In August 1990 V. P. Singh acted on Mandal's recommendations that up to 49.5 percent of all jobs in central government services and public undertakings should be reserved for the SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). For the effects of the Mandal commission see Beteille (1992), Corbridge (2000), and Parry (1999b).

understand both the idea and the practices of the state.<sup>62</sup> In a similar way, whilst the majority of tribal people retain the understandings that I have already discussed, an emerging change is also evident among younger generations of tribal peasants. For example, this has, in fact, impeded upon the politics of state contractorship in Tapu.

The first Block Development Office scheme was implemented in the village in 1996 and has been followed by one every year since. While there were always tactical battles among potential contractors, up until 2001 all the contractors elected, except the first in 1996,<sup>63</sup> were men of *zamindar* descendant lineage. In the last two years, however, these elections have precipitated increasingly fraught conflict between young educated Munda men, on the one hand and the *zamindar* descendants on the other. The group of Munda young men, unlike their parents, have escaped the essentialised view of the state as something to be feared. This is a result of their school and college education, which has given them opportunities to understand the state and its agents in different ways.

As a result, when a community hall was to be built in the village under a Block Development scheme in 2001, local *zamindar* descendants perceived the young educated Munda men as a real threat. There were heated debates between the two groups over whether Mundas should also gain the chance to become contractors. The young Mundas espoused the 'democratic' philosophy that everyone should have the opportunity to be a contractor, and saw 2001 as their turn. They said that they would spend the money

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<sup>62</sup> In fact, in many other areas of India, the activities of the modern development state have enabled power structures of the village to change – Gupta (1998) notes this in his study of a village in Uttar Pradesh where power shifts from the patronage of Thakur *ex-zamindars* to the brokerage of Brahmins involved in state development programmes. Wadley (1994) notes similarly of the rebellion of the poor in Karimpur against their ex-landlords through democratic government, an increase in education, and movement into urban employment.

<sup>63</sup> This one exception was nevertheless a man of the same caste and someone that the other Munda tenant descendants saw as being related to the *zamindar* lineage. As I will show in Chapter 6, his success caused conflict in Tapu as the *zamindar* descendants sought revenge. He was successful in acquiring a Block Office contract largely because of the fact that it was the first Block Office contract and he had developed a network of political elite outside the village.

earned from contractorship on football shirts for their teams. In response the *zamindar* descendants raised two main objections to Mundas becoming contractors. First they said that *zamindar* descendants, had worked hard to ensure that the scheme came to the village and, as such, Mundas should not attempt to steal the fruit of other's labour. Secondly, they contended that the Mundas would have little idea about how to save money, deal with Block Officers or implement such a big project. In effect they would be relying on help from the *zamindar* descendants.

The issue made relationships between the young men very tense and there was even talk of violent action. Moreover, if elections for the contractor took place, it was not clear who would win the majority of the votes. While some Mundas would vote for the ex-*zamindar* representative who continued to be their patron, and many Mundas would not want to vote at all as the process represented a polluted sphere of activity in which they wanted no part, others were likely to vote for a Munda candidate.

In response to this confrontation, the main *zamindar* descendant contender, Neel, used his knowledge of the implementation of the project to shift the scheme to another village. That the scheme was proposed for the village was in fact the result of Neel's actions six months beforehand when he had seen that the Area Development Plan did not award Tapu a single scheme that year. He had thus bribed one of the Block Officers to assign a community hall to Tapu. Hence, when battles over contractorship for the community hall emerged in Tapu, Neel asked his friend in the neighbouring Jahanabaj village to send a petition to the MLA. The petition was to notify the MLA of a bribe by a villager to move the community hall scheme from Jahanabaj to Tapu, and as such propose that it be shifted back to Jahanabaj. Neel hoped that through this his friend in Jahanabaj would win contractorship (since he would have brought the scheme to Jahanabaj) and that, in turn, he would share half his profits with Neel. On receiving the petition, the MLA decided that a meeting of all the concerned villages was required to decide which village should receive the scheme. Neel and his family managed, however, to keep the knowledge of this meeting away from most young educated tribal men of Tapu. With no representatives from Tapu, the MLA decided that the scheme ought to be

shifted back to Jahanabaj. And, as a result, no Block Office scheme was implemented that year in Tapu.

Whilst demonstrating how the local elite attempts to control knowledge of Block Development schemes, this brief story also serves to show how the traditional tribal peasant view of the state is transforming amongst younger, more educated generations. Indeed, these groups are increasingly seeking to engage in the practices of the state. Whilst not yet involved in networks that are capable of mediating state schemes, it is clear that many young educated tribal men no longer see the state as something to be kept away from. Instead, they understand that they too can gain from its local processes. The challenge for the educated Munda youth now is thus to fully understand and influence how the state works. However, as an emergent tribal middle class enters the spheres of the state, many more are left feeling that this is further evidence of the state's malign strength. Parents, for example, often strongly disapproved of their son's involvement in state activities. They, like tribal peasants more generally, retain the belief that the state corrupts individuals and weakens tribal society.

#### Chapter 4: Understanding the Democratic State: The *Parha Mela*

On 3rd June 1999, as I was about to return to England from a period of preliminary research for this thesis, I got caught with about 50000 people, most of whom were tribal, in the merriment of a spectacular festival happening on my doorstep in Bero.<sup>64</sup> There was a dramatic dance procession in which people waving huge flags were carried on colourful wooden elephants and horses. The parade circled the market square and then the people on the elephants and horses dismounted and ascended a specially erected stage. Amidst this spectacle, others danced to the beating of village drums and to the rhythm of more 'modern' Nagpuri songs blasting from loudspeakers. The fringe of the crowded market square was lined with small stalls selling plastic toys for children, deep-fried savouries, sweets and tea. Vendors had also come from the surrounding villages to sell *mahua-pani* (alcohol distilled from the *mahua* flower) and *hadia* (rice-beer). People had arrived by foot and by specially organised public transport (buses, tractors with trailers, trucks and jeeps) from villages as far away as 30 kilometres for this annual fiesta.

I was told that the festival was to unite all the people of the area in one place and in one time so that they could celebrate and respect the *parha* - the traditional sacred tribal system of socio-political governance (See Chapter 2). At this time I was only vaguely aware of the rich social landscape around me and was hence surprised when my friends pulled me away from our dancing and took me on a two kilometre walk to the next village, Baridih, where almost the same festival was happening with a similar mass of people. Concentrating on trying to impress my friends with how quickly I could learn the dance steps, I made only a vague note of the fact that our dancing at both villages was taking place against a backdrop of two local politicians making fierce speeches against each other. However, when I returned to Tapu in November 2000 for doctoral fieldwork, it became clear that the June *parha jatra* (or *parha mela* in Hindi) was the symbolic focus of the battle for power between two Oraon tribals who preferred to go by

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<sup>64</sup> See the Appendix B, the film, 'Heads and Tales' for visual imagery of the beginning of the festival.

the surname, Bhagat. The Bero *parha mela* was the stronghold of Karamchand Bhagat, and the Baridih *parha mela* was the stronghold of Vishwanath Bhagat. Of further interest about these two men was that they had both been MLAs for the area.

MLAs are elected by the people to the State Assembly, the *Vidhan Sabha*, at least every five years. MLA constituencies are single-member and territorial, with the population in each constituency being more or less the same. As a result of the positive discrimination policies of the Indian state, a certain number of MLA seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes and Castes that are allocated in proportion to their population in a particular state. In the Tapu area, the MLA seat is reserved for Scheduled Tribes.<sup>65</sup>

In seeking to understand this democratic state, I take inspiration in this chapter from recent work that advances a more worm's eye view of democracy. Indeed, in this vein, West, for instance, shows how official democratic procedures, such as elections, are reshaped in the idioms of sorcery in rural Mozambique (1998). Or, as Apter (1987) demonstrates, democratic procedures are transformed in ritual practice amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria. Elsewhere, Goldman (2002) argues that democratic processes in Brazil need to be understood in the context of how people at the local level differentiate the domain of politics from the realm of culture. And Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) show how local arguments for a one-party state in Botswana are not a dismissal of democracy per se, but rather a rejection of procedural democracy in favour of a substantive democracy that draws on older notions of political authority entailing both deliberation over policy matters and accountability by those who govern. Following the impetus of such approaches, I employ the insight they offer to explore why the *parha mela* is so important to democratically elected state representatives in the Tapu area, and what this reveals about the nature of democratic representation and the democratic state.

My first proposition is that tribal peasants see the role of an MLA as one that protects tribal society, and its *parha*, from dangerous and alien outsiders such as the state. In

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<sup>65</sup> The constituency was initially Bero but from 1977 it expanded and was called the Mandar constituency.



order to do this the MLA is expected to wield considerable influence over the state but, crucially, to not become part of it. To the tribal peasants, the ex-tenants of the landlords, the most legitimate MLA is the one who best fulfils this role, and it is to his *mela* that they would attend. My second proposition is that, in contrast to the tribal peasants, the local political elite, the descendants of the *ex-zamindars* and educated tribals, saw the MLA as an elected state official who would enable their better access to state resources and boost their status in the village. Furthermore, and developing the argument of the previous chapter, a third proposition is that for the local political elite to maintain their powerful positions, it is essential for them in certain contexts to create a distinction between the morally inferior temporal domain of the state and the ritually pure and superior world of the sacred tribal *parha*.

## The Events

Village *jatras* are not new in the Tapu area. The periods between May and June and between November and December are known as the *jatra* months. *Jatras* are a gathering of a few hundred people, hosted one night in one village, the next night by the neighbouring one and so on for a period of about twelve days. Bero village traditionally hosted its small village *jatra* on the first Thursday of June every year. However, from 1967 there has been a concerted effort to unite all the people of the surrounding villages on 3rd June<sup>66</sup> in Bero in the name of the *parha*. Karamchand Bhagat initiated the *jatra* in this form, the year he first became an MLA.

On 2 June 1967, in Chiri village, about 160 kilometres from Bero in the neighbouring Lohardaga District, a militant tribal organization, the *Birsa Seva Dal*<sup>67</sup>, robbed and then

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<sup>66</sup> The Gregorian almanac was used and not the Indian *Panchangam*.

<sup>67</sup> The *Birsa Seva Dal* was headed by Lalit Kujur and Hiranmoi Roy and demanded jobs and educational reservations for tribals, in particular in industrial complexes, and was also fighting for the separation of Jharkhand from Bihar (cf. Prakash, 2001: 113 and Weiner, 1988: 176-178). Until 1969 it was a radically militant and largely underground organization that was directly involved in re-appropriation of urban

set fire to a non-tribal, *zamindar* descendent, Sahu house. The tribal militants said they were taking revenge on the Sahus because they had taken tribal land to build their house. Following complaints of the Sahus, the local police open fired on the protesting tribals, killing six of them. To avert mass protest, the government applied Article 144 of the Constitution, a total curfew, in the Ranchi, Gumla and Lohardaga Districts – and hence in the Bero area too.

The first Thursday of June that year, the day of the Bero *jatra*, was 3rd June. About the same time as the Chiri incident was taking place, Karamchand Bhagat had a fight with the local Bihari Block Development Officer regarding the implementation of a particular development scheme. Infuriated by these developments, and building on a tribal anger in the aftermath of the Chiri killings, Karamchand Bhagat decided to mobilize all tribal people in the area to break the curfew, create a blockade of the Block Development Office, demand the removal of all outsiders from the area, and proceed with the *mela*. He claims that on that day more than 100000 tribal people defied the government to participate in the *mela*. From the following year the *mela* took place on 3rd June every year in Bero and was named the *parha mela*. Hence from 1967, thousands of people have gathered in Bero on 3rd June in a mass celebration, the size of which the village had never seen before.

In the years preceding the 1967 *mela*, Karamchand Bhagat had been actively involved in trying to revive the *parha* in collaboration with the twelve *parha raja*, Simone Oraon (twelve *parha* includes the villages of Bero, Baridih and Tapu). In this effort, Karamchand was particularly influenced by Kartik Oraon, a man recruited by Nehru in 1959, when they met at the High Commission in London, to lead the Congress Party in Jharkhand – a region of poor Congress support.<sup>68</sup> Having worked for British Railways,

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lands in Jamshedpur. Police repression then largely terminated the more radical component of the organization (Vidyarthi and Sahay, 1976).

<sup>68</sup> Although this was at odds with Nehru's general policy at the time, as Weiner (1988:191) points out, it was necessary for Congress to have tribal candidates due to the system of reserved parliamentary and state assembly seats.

and the Atomic Power Department of Taylor and Woodrow Construction Ltd. in Middlesex, Kartik Oraon was at the time engaged in the design of the world's then biggest Atomic Power Station, the Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station in UK. Nehru promised Kartik Oraon a job in the newly established Indo-Russian project of the Heavy Engineering Corporation in Ranchi which he joined as Deputy Chief Engineer on his return to India in 1961. A year and a half later, Kartik Oraon quit this job and began full-time activities for the Congress party.

In order to curb the popularity of the dominant Jharkhand Party, considered the party of the Christian Church,<sup>69</sup> Kartik Oraon's project was to unite non-Christian tribals and Hindus against Christians in Jharkhand. This anti-Christian strategy became a crucial part of the Congress Party campaign in Jharkhand in the early sixties, and had its peak in 1967 when Kartik Oraon, as Ranchi District MP,<sup>70</sup> made the momentous move of

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<sup>69</sup> The Jharkhand Party had its roots in the Dacca Students Union formed in 1910 with the aim of demanding better educational facilities and job opportunities for tribal students, and formed by two missionaries from the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran (GEL) Church. In the 1920s, this Union renamed themselves the *Chota Ncpur Unnati Samaj* (Chotanagpur Improvement Society). Following this, the more popular Roman Catholics formed the *Chota Nagpur Catholic Sabha*. In the 1937 pre-Independence elections, the latter party even won two seats. In 1938, all the Christian *sabhas* merged to form the *Chota Nagpur Adivasi Mahasabha*. A major component of the *Adivasi Mahasabha* campaign was to fight against non-tribal outsiders, termed *diku*, who were said to be benefiting from the worsening socio-economic and political conditions of tribal people. By 1950, realizing that it needed support from non-tribals, the *Adivasi Mahasabha* renamed itself the Jharkhand Party and extended its membership to non-tribals too. The first State Assembly Elections in 1952 saw the Jharkhand Party as the main opposition to Congress in the Bihar Legislative Council. It had secured over 70% of the 34 assembly seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in Bihar. In Bero constituency, the Jharkhand Party candidate secured 62% of the vote with Congress coming second with only 29.2%. This pattern continued for the next two elections. (Source of election results: Singh and Bose, 1988).

<sup>70</sup> In the fourth general election of 1967 the Jharkhand Party won only 24% of the reserved seats. By then Congress had become the lead party in the area. Many factors are thought to have contributed to the loss of influence of the Jharkhand Party: In the 1957 elections Jharkhand Party had accepted financial support from the Janata Party in Bihar (which unlike the central Janata Party represented the interests of landed classes) (Prakash, 2001). Internal factionalism showed when the Jharkhand Party split in 1963 and Jaipal Singh and his faction supported by the Roman Catholic Church went over to support Congress. Jaipal

placing a bill in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament at the Central level) that sought to deny Christians and Muslims the right to be granted tribal status.<sup>71</sup> Also central to Kartik Oraon's anti-Christian drive was reestablishing the *parha* in 1963 in Ranchi (Das, 1992).<sup>72</sup> The *parha* held the great promise of uniting non-Christian tribals and reducing the potential for them to be converted to Christianity.

Karamchand was so influenced by Kartik Oraon that some of my informants say Kartik Oraon's rise in politics to his eventual death in 1981, was reflected in Karamchand Bhagat's rise and fall in the Congress Party. In Bero, although he could not use Kartik Oraon's anti-Christian rhetoric for fear of alienating the substantial Christian population (approximately 15%), Karamchand drew on Kartik Oraon's idea of reviving the *parha* as a political tool. Two years before the 1967 *mela*, he called the *parha* to meet in order to solve a dispute that had been brought to his attention. It was a case of a married Muslim building contractor, Balku Mian, who was having an affair with a widowed Oraon woman, a teacher in Bero. Whilst the woman was a local tribal, Balku was not.

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Singh and his collaborators portrayed this to be a tactical move and claimed that the Jharkhand Party would better be able to fight for the tribal cause of a separate state from within the government as had been the case with the creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953, Maharashtra in 1960 and Nagaland in 1963. His opponents however speculated, that Congress had bribed Jaipal Singh for a place in the government ministry (Vidyarthi and Sahay, 1976: 100). Jharkhand Party further lost favour as it was criticized as being controlled by Christian urban professionals and not having an agrarian programme, accepting landlords and moneylenders who it was formed against, and failing to address the growing labour unrest and trade-union activities in TISCO and other industrial projects in the area (Devalle, 140-141).

<sup>71</sup> Weiner has a fascinating interview with Kartik Oraon on why he had placed such a Bill in parliament at the time (Weiner, 1988: 185-186).

<sup>72</sup> Kartik Oraon was building on the attempts of others in the late forties who feared that if Jharkhand materialized only Christians would rule as the Jharkhand Movement was seen at the time as a gift of Christian missionaries. Between 1947-48, on the advice of a barrister from Calcutta *Kili Prasad Khatri*, two organizations were formed. One was *Sudhar Sabha* presided by Theble Oraon and with Mahadipa Oraon as secretary, the other was *Parha* formed by Somnath Oraon which even started a weekly magazine called the *Parha* but which, as a result of financial problems, lasted only three years. These organizations seem to have lasted only a few years and I was not able to gain more information on why this was the case.

He had arrived more recently into the area with a group of Muslims from Bihar and was not a descendant of the Muslims who had a long history. The woman's brother had brought the case to the attention of the village elders. Karamchand, seeing the importance of taking issue with the capture of a tribal woman by an 'outsider' Muslim man, made this case central to the revival of the *parha*. The *parha* met and it was agreed that Balku should be fined Rs3000 to be paid to the *parha*, and that he and the woman should stop living together. In later years, Simone Oraon and Vishwanath Bhagat accused Karamchand of letting Balku get away without paying the fine, and of arranging for the couple to have a civil court wedding, in return for free bricks for his mansion. Nevertheless, whilst many people in the Bero area today are unsure about what actually happened, most remember this as the first big case of the *parha*.

Following three elections in which the Jharkhand Party had won the MLA seat in Bero, in the first year of the *parha mela* in 1967, Karamchand Bhagat, representing the Congress party, was voted in as MLA with 53.3% of the vote. He won four more MLA elections in 1969, 1972, 1977 and 1980, over which time he used the *mela* each year to promote the unity and strength of the *parha*. Following Kartik Oraon's death in 1981, Karamchand Bhagat lost his Congress candidacy to Ganga Tana Bhagat in the 1985 elections. The latter, in the aftermath of Kartik Oraon's death, had been networking hard and effectively with Congress party representatives in Ranchi. Coincidentally, in June that year, Karamchand Bhagat was infected with the bacteria *E. Coli* and was admitted to hospital on the day of the *parha mela*. As a result Ganga Tana Bhagat hosted the *mela*.

In 1986, both Ganga Tana Bhagat and Karamchand Bhagat wanted to host the *parha mela*. By this time Ganga, to Karamchand's disappointment, had also secured the support of Simone Oraon, the twelve *parha raja*. Simone's main reason for shifting allegiance from Karamchand to Ganga was that, in some of the *melas*, Karamchand had offended the *parha*. Simone claimed that Karamchand had given his rightful seat (as *parha raja*), on the wooden horse that represented the village god and goddess, to the Chief Minister of Bihar. Thus, with Simone's support, Ganga told Karamchand that it

was his right as MLA to host the 1986 *mela*. However, Karamchand claimed that the *mela* had nothing to do with being an MLA and said that the right to host the *mela* lay with the person who started it. The battle between Ganga and Karamchand culminated in a meeting in which the District Commissioner, the Senior Superintendent of Police, and the Sub-Divisional Officer were called to mediate. It was decided that both ought to host the *mela* together. However, the tension remained, and at the end of the *mela*, Karamchand accused Ganga of being corrupt and embezzling some of the Rs65000 collected for the *mela*.

The battle around who would host the *mela* continued in 1987. As a result of the experiences of the previous year, Ganga decided that the 'real' *parha mela* ought to be held, as was 'traditionally' the case, on the first Thursday of June and not on the 3rd June. He claimed that having the *mela* on a particular date, the 3rd June, was not authentic to tribal society as it followed a Western style calendar. In 1987, the first Thursday was the 2nd June and Ganga Tana Bhagat held his *parha mela* in Bero on that date. On the following day, the 3rd June, Karamchand had planned his own *parha mela* in Bero as he had done since the Chiri incident, twenty years before. Ganga and his followers held a large protest against Karamchand. Karamchand, using his connections in the government, initiated a police charge on the protestors. As a result, Ganga and some of his supporters spent a night in jail.

The following two years, in 1988 and 1989, Ganga continued to hold his *mela* in Bero on the first Thursday of June, while Karamchand held his own separate one in Bero on 3rd June. However, in 1990 Ganga, once again the Congress party candidate, lost the MLA elections and the seat was returned to Karamchand. This time Karamchand had become a candidate of Laloo Yadav's party, the *Rashtriya Janata Dal*. In response, one of Ganga's supporters, a young energetic man from the same village, Vishwanath Bhagat, decided that he would attempt to displace Karamchand at the next elections by representing the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* (JMM or Jharkhand Liberation Front). To do so he wanted to take over Ganga's role and host the 1990 *parha mela* on the first Thursday of June in Bero. There was a problem that year, however, as the first Thursday

of the month fell on 3rd of June.<sup>73</sup> The question arose as to who would have the *mela* in Bero: Karamchand or Vishwanath?

Tensions rose in the days preceding the *mela*. Three days before, a jeep carrying Vishwanath's supporters broke down as it was passing through Cherma village, a stronghold of Karamchand's supporters. Vishwanath's men were carrying arms. Karamchand was informed. Karamchand filed an FIR (a first information report) to the police under the Arms Act 307. Before the jeep could be fixed, the police caught the men and took them to jail. On 1st and 2nd June, Vishwanath's supporters organized a massive road jam demanding the release of the jailed people. They were released the day before the scheduled *mela*. Once more a meeting was held so that the District Commissioner, the Senior Superintendent of Police and the Sub-Divisional Officer could intervene. Karamchand insisted that of the 365 days in the year, 3rd June was his day to host the *mela*. And against his considerable power as MLA, Vishwanath was not able to secure Bero as the venue for his *parha mela*. As a result, his faction decided that the next morning they would still hold a *mela*, but that they would shift it to Vishwanath's village, Baridih, two kilometres from Bero. They had the full support of the twelve *parha raja*, Simone Oraon, but also sought at least one more *raja* to gain further legitimacy for their *mela*. And so, on the night before the *mela*, in the neighbouring twenty-one *parha*, they elected an alternative *raja* to the prevailing one who supported Karamchand. Hence from 1990, to the present day, two competing *parha melas* have been held on the same date, 3rd June, but in two different villages, Bero and Baridih.

After establishing the second *parha mela* in Baridih, and in the run up to the 1995 elections, Vishwanath and his workers in the JMM began a campaign for the strengthening of the *parha*. As such, *parha* meetings, that had rarely taken place in the past, began to convene. It became mandatory for at least the *pahan* (the spiritual head)

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<sup>73</sup> Calculating back, the first Thursday of June in 1990 was 7 June and not 3 June. I became aware of this miscalculation only after I returned from the field and was unable to discover the basis of the discrepancy. Nevertheless it is not important for the argument here as in Bero Vishwanath, Karamchand, Ganga and Simone are all reproducing a discourse that the first Thursday of June in 1990 was the 3 June.

and *paenbharra* (the assistant spiritual head) from every village to attend as village representatives. Attendance registers were taken at every meeting with a punishment for non-attendance, the right of the rest of the *parha* members to take any pig they found in that particular village. Disputes were brought to the meetings and 'solved' (See Chapter 5). And a *Parha Sanchalan Samitti* (*Parha* Coordination Committee) was formed to keep meeting records.

In 1995 Vishwanath Bhagat won the MLA elections. He allocated part of his MLA fund to build a *Parha* Community Centre in the field in Baridih where his *parha mela* took place. This further strengthened the Baridih *parha mela*. Each year the number of people attending the Baridih *mela* increased. In fact people began going to both the Baridih and the Bero *melas*. So by 2000, it was not possible to tell which ceremony was better attended.

In 2000 Vishwanath lost his MLA seat to a Congress Party candidate, Dev Kumar Dhan. Dhan was not from the immediate Bero area and was thus unaware of the long history of the two separate *melas*. Confused, he called a meeting on 21st April to ask several questions. First, why was there two *melas* in two different places on the same day at the same time? Second, why did the twelve *parha*, the *parha* to which Tapu, Bero and Baridih belonged, have two *parha rajas*? Third, why did the *parha* not mobilize more people to attend the road jams he organized to petition the government to do something about the increasing threat of, and damage done, by wild elephants in the area.

Every important 'leader' in the area was invited to this meeting, and about 40 people attended. Vishwanath Bhagat, Ganga Tana Bhagat, Simone Oraon, Lal Shahdeo (former BJP Block president and ex-*zamindar* of Ita Childri village), Akshay Roy (of the ex-*zamindar* family in Baridih, often described as Vishwanath's right hand man), Chitis Roy (father of Akshay Roy), and many of the previous JMM workers of Vishwanath's party were present. Karamchand, however, did not attend on the grounds that the meeting was not a legitimate *parha* one since it was being held under the mango tree in Baridih village and not in Bero. From Tapu, the *pahan* and *paenbharra* made their



mandatory appearance (although I could not help noticing the *pahan* falling asleep in the long four hour meeting). And they were joined from Tapu by two descendents of the *zamindari* family.

Each 'leader' took his turn to speak about the issues involved. Although I do not want to go into the details of their debate here, of importance was that, at the end of the meeting, whilst everyone agreed that the elephants could only be fought off if the *parha* was strengthened, Dev Kumar Dhan was apologetic that he had brought up the topic of the *mela* and the *rajas*. He said he had not realized its complexities and that he would leave the decisions of the *mela* and the *rajas* to the *parha* community. He announced, however, that he would give money from his MLA fund to build a *Parha* Centre in Dola Tanr where all the *parhas* met each year in the annual hunt, *Bisu Sikar*.

However, this was not the conclusion as the meeting had taken its own momentum. A follow up was arranged in Bero a week later to which Karamchand was once again invited. This took place on 28th April, and at least 100 people attended – the numbers swelled by Karamchand and his supporters. Once again there was a long series of speeches. Whilst everyone said they agreed to the *mela* being held in one place and not two, no decision was taken as to where that ought to be: Baridih or Bero?

A final meeting, a week later, was held to take a vote on this issue. Karamchand did not attend. Vishwanath left very early. Dev Kumar Dhan came very late. Public opinion at the meeting was totally divided on whether the *mela* should be held in Bero or in Baridih. As a result it was concluded that the two *melas* would be held, as had been the status quo since 1990, in both Baridih and Bero.

Following those meetings, the 2001 *melas* proceeded.<sup>74</sup> In the days preceding it, there was great excitement in Tapu. The *pahan* and *paenbharra*, went from house to house collecting the fist full of rice, oil, spices and other donations people wished to give for the feast for the guests at the end of the *mela*. In addition to the compulsory donation,

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<sup>74</sup> See the Appendix B, the film, 'Heads and Tales' for visual imagery of both the Bero and Baridih *mela*.

old Jatru Munda gave half a kilogram of his best *gongra*, a vegetable like a courgette. Onga Munda gave a kilogram of onions. Indeed, many of the old Munda men were proud to give some of their best crops to the *parha*. The *pahan* and *paenbharra* took the village collection to a pre-*parha mela* meeting in Baridih village where some of Vishwanath's men wrote down the contribution from each village with the purpose of fining villages that had not contributed.

The four Munda and Gope houses of Tapu who each hired a space to set up a small plastic tent to sell sweets, deep fried lentil and rice snacks and tea on the Baridih *mela* grounds had prepared their wares and secured some labour in the village to help them for the *mela* day. Many of the Munda women and some Badaik men had spent the days before the *mela* brewing *hadia* and *mahua-pani* to sell in the clearing in the forest where many routes from different villages met to follow the path to the *melas*. Some of the younger Munda men had been recruited by Vishwanath to be volunteers on the day of the *mela* to carry out odd jobs requested by Vishwanath and his political elite. A few of the migrants from the brick kilns had returned in time for the *mela*. Young unmarried tribal women were borrowing each other's *sarees* for the day and they teased each other about the boys they hoped to dance with at the *mela*. Only the female descendents of the *zamindari* households would stay at home and wait for their men to bring home sweets for them. Most of the Tapu people were going to Vishwanath's *mela*, although the more energetic young men planned to catch a glimpse of Karamchand's *mela* too.

After some filming of the village in the early light, I left Tapu with the Jandarshan crew, with whom I was making a film on the *mela* (see Appendix B), to shoot the *parha* sacrifice of chickens to the spirits. This was undertaken by the *pahan* and *paenbharra* of Baridih in the presence of the twelve *parha raja*, Simone Oraon. After the event, the tribal elders present shared a pot of *mahua-pani*, giving the first drop to the spirits by tipping some drink from the *sal* leaf cups on to the ground.

Between these morning hours and the beginning of the *mela* at about 3.00 pm, there was a great amount of commotion between Bero and Baridih. Vishwanath and Karamchand

were both giving the final touches to their *mela*. In Baridih, the stage for the distinguished guests was being prepared. From his tent shop in Bero, Chand Odhar (the *zamindar* descendent) of Tapu had provided the best deal to the *parha* for the marquee, chairs, tables and other stage equipment at Rs24000 for three days. The man from the electrical shop in Bero seemed to spend hours testing his mike and loudspeakers in Baridih, 'Testing One, Two, Three'. Vishwanath's key workers were still trying to pester the Block Officials for donations. There were rumors that this year they had managed to collect only Rs12000 from the Block whereas in 1994, the sum had been Rs35000. Jeeps of policemen were parked in the vicinity, waiting for the arrival of Shibhu Soren, the JMM president. Trucks, buses, trailers, tractors, any vehicle whose owner Vishwanath and his men had convinced into offering their services for the day, started to arrive from the surrounding villages. They were filled with people hanging out of the doors, windows, on the roofs and sometimes even sitting on the bonnet in front of the windscreen.

We waited with the twelve *parha raja* Simone Oraon, who was anxious for the god and goddess, the red wooden horse on which he sat, to arrive from Kudarko village. Some of the horses, pots and other symbols of gods and goddesses had already arrived. Karamchand had not managed to secure these for his *mela* this year. As we waited, Simone recalled the 1990 *mela* when Karamchand's men had stopped a truck driven by Vishwanath's worker, Ghinu Oraon. He was bringing the god and goddess wooden elephant for the Baridih *mela*, but had been beaten and the elephant had to be taken to the Bero *mela*. Fortunately as he finished his story, Simone's horse arrived safely on a tractor. At around the same time Simone received the signal from Vishwanath's volunteers that Shibhu Soren had arrived. It was time to start the procession.

The Baridih *pahan* and *paenbharra* bowed to all the symbols of gods and goddesses that had arrived. To the beating of drums, Simone, the twenty-one *parha raja* and the relevant *pahan* and *paenbharras*, mounted their horses and elephants. The men hired to carry them, lifted the horses and elephants and danced with them behind Vishwanath Bhagat and Shibhu Soren and his bodyguards at the front of the parade. Later, from film

footage and accounts of other people, we learnt that a similar process had taken place in Bero except it was Karamchand and his sons that were on the horses and elephants. As the procession began, we climbed up a ladder to take perch on the recently built Hanuman temple outside Baridih from where we hoped to get aerial shots of the rest of the *parha* parade before they embarked onto the stage. Simone, smiling away, looked a peculiarly regal sight on a wooden horse carried by eight other men with a black umbrella to protect him from the sun in one hand and a huge white *parha* flag waving in the other.<sup>75</sup>

It was the first *mela* since Jharkhand gained independence, and both Karamchand and Vishwanath drew on this in their speeches. While Karamchand argued that Jharkhand had gained independence because of the strength of the *parha*, Vishwanath differed to his chief guest Shibhu Soren. About one million people were expected on 3rd June 2001. However, as Simone and the others ascended onto the stage, Simone's umbrella came to have an unintended purpose. For the first time in the *parha mela*'s history, there was torrential rain and the crowds dispersed and sought shelter. The politicians, on their stages, ended up in a wide, empty space in which to preach.<sup>76</sup>

### **Elaborating on the *Parha Mela***

Every 3rd June since 1990, the people in the villages surrounding Bero have thus had a choice of two *melas* to attend. Although people sometimes attend both on the same day, the majority have preferred to attend and stay at just one. As such, each year Vishwanath and Karamchand have tried to secure as many people as possible to attend their own *mela*. Indeed, many of Vishwanath's supporters suggest that the number of people at a particular *mela* indicate the political strength of that MLA.

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<sup>75</sup> See the Appendix B, the film 'Heads and Tales' for visual imagery of this part of the *Mela*.

<sup>76</sup> See the Appendix B, the film, 'Heads and Tales'.

A large mass of people at the *mela* had implications for the strength of an MLA in at least three main ways. The first is that, in choosing one *mela* over another, tribal peasants are mainly guided by which *mela* is considered more legitimate and, in turn, which MLA is more legitimate. The second is that the number of people attending a *mela* reflects the strength of the political elite working for each MLA to convince the tribal peasants to a particular *mela*. This, in turn, reflects their strength at the time of an election (to convince people to vote, capture booths, or cast bogus votes). The third is that the number of people supporting an MLA helps to demonstrate his local strength to outside patrons supporting – therefore securing patronage from politicians at higher levels who determine his position and promotion within a party. In sections that follow, I want to demonstrate that different sections of the local population have contrasting motivations to support one MLA's *mela* over the other.

### **The tribal peasant understandings**

In Tapu the most important factor influencing tribal peasant attendance at a particular *mela* is the relative legitimacy they attribute to one MLA over his rival. To explore this reasoning, and, in particular, the tribal concept of MLA legitimacy, I first return to, and elaborate upon, the tribal peasants' ideas of the state outlined in the previous chapter.

In the Tapu area, *sarkar*, the state, was seen by tribal people to be a recent and outside invasion that had become an increasingly potent form of danger to tribal society. Tribal peasants believed, therefore, it was best to keep away from all things associated with the state. Most were sure that in former times, when the state was not present, tribal society was more united and, therefore, stronger.

However, as the state expanded its powers, it was seen to have an increasing potential to pollute tribal society by corrupting those individuals who came to (aspire to) engage with it. Indeed many tribal peasants believed that the state had brought *rajniti*, politics, into tribal *samaj*, community, further dividing tribal society. As such, in the tribal peasant point of view, the development of politics appeared to be related to the

development and expansion of the state. This was contrasted with the period before the state, in which tribal society was believed to have been far more harmonious.

In contrast to the state, therefore, the *parha* was seen as authentic, local, apolitical, timeless and of the community. Indeed, the *parha* was thought to be so ancient that its origin could never be known. Moreover, and again in contrast to the state, the *parha* was considered to be sacred and, like the *pahan* and the *paenbharra* (Chapter 2), to derive its legitimacy from the spirits of the tribal forefathers who protected tribal society from evil. To most tribal peasants, the *parha* was the essence that united and protected them – an essence that had, in recent years, been weakened by the state. One common example of this weakening of the *parha* was the rise of modern courts as an important function of the *parha* was to solve disputes in the area. Furthermore, tribal peasants saw state courts as being extortionately expensive, and places in which one was inevitably cheated by mediators and lawyers. Most importantly, though, state court decisions were seen to lack legitimacy because outsiders, not local people, controlled them.

Another example of how the state had weakened the *parha* was that it had taken over the rights of the forest, and held the ability to jail those that did not obey its rules. Indeed, this became a growing frustration to most tribal peasants during the year I was in Tapu as elephant crop raiding and damage had increased. The general consensus among tribal peasants was that they should go out and kill the elephants, as this is what they would have done in the annual *parha* hunt, *Bisu Sirkar*, in the days when the *parha* was strong. Now, however, their potential action was limited as the state prohibited, and would arrest, those that killed big wild animals. Worse still, the state did little about the persistent attacks by elephants.

In the face of this weakening of tribal society by the state, tribal peasants saw it important to strengthen the *parha*. The *parha mela* was seen as central to both the celebration of, and hence the strengthening of, the *parha*. Thus, for most tribal peasants, the *parha mela* symbolised the assertion and commitment to the local community, in direct opposition to exploitative outsiders like the state.

Relatedly, the role of strengthening tribal society in opposition to the state was attributed to the MLA. Unlike Block Development Officers, Forest Officers and the Police, the MLA was not seen as being part of the state but instead as a local person who remained part of tribal society. Indeed, the unanimous view amongst tribal peasants was that the MLA was like their *dhangar*, their bonded labourer, whose job it was to protect them from the state. In order to do so, the MLA was expected to know people in, and to wield considerable influence over, the state so that he could keep it at a bay. Thus, the person who could best fulfill this role was generally considered the most legitimate MLA. This, in turn, would have significant bearing on which *parha mela* tribal peasants attended.

### **The political elite understandings**

From the perspective of the local political elite, the functions of the MLA, as well as the state more generally, were very different. Indeed, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the local elite, in contrast to tribal peasants, engaged in intimate relations with the state and were in fact representative of the blurring of the boundaries between state and society. Furthermore, as I proposed, the local elite had a clear understanding of the idea of the state as serving the public good, and could rationalize why, in many ways, their actions showed little commitment to this idea. Above all, I argued, the local political elite was keen to know about the practices of the state so as to make it work best for themselves.

Unsurprising, therefore, the local political elite saw the MLA as a position in the state, and the person elected MLA as their representative to higher levels of the state system. Unlike the tribals, they were not interested in protecting their society from the state. They saw the MLA as wielding power within the state mechanism, power that could make the state work best for them. Indeed, the main reason for voting for one particular candidate was because of the promise of greater access to state resources. Vishwanath was able to gain the support of many educated tribal and non-tribal young men to work

for him in the days preceding the election for the promise of contracts from the Block and from his MLA fund in return.<sup>77</sup>

Support from the political elite was, in turn, important to each MLA. This was especially the case during elections when they undertook several key roles. First, elite supporters were needed to convince people to go to the voting booths, to take people there, and, most importantly, to ensure that they voted for the right candidate. Second, the elite support was essential to capture the booth area in order to prevent representatives from other parties operating there. This was usually done through physical strength, by ensuring that there were enough supporters to prevent another party from entering the booth area. Third, and towards the end of the election day, elite supporters may be required to go into the booths and cast bogus votes – that is, votes in the name of all the people on the electoral roll who did not turn up to vote. For instance, when Vishwanath won the elections in 1995, his two main workers in Tapu, both from the *zamindari* lineage, each cast at least 30 bogus votes.<sup>78</sup>

The idea that in a democratic state people have the right to choose their government, and thus have representation in state powers, was well recognised by most of the political elite in the Tapu area. However, whether there is a commitment to this idea was questionable in several key ways. For instance, the political elite often talked of democracy as an inappropriate idea for rural India as they felt that it further divided an already segregated area. Indeed, I met many men in the Bero area who had stopped being party workers, or were considering doing so, as they felt that their work had

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<sup>77</sup> In the Tapu area MLA candidates often paid these workers to cast bogus votes. I have heard claims of payment that vary between Rs50 to Rs200. Bailey claims that similar payment in 1960s Orissa is at least a partial explanation for the poverty of the electorate and shows that scrupulous honesty is regarded as a luxury for the wealthy (Bailey, 1963: 32). In the Tapu area, however, this payment was regarded only as a nominal sum and it was expected that people would spend it on eating meat and drinking alcohol at the end of the election.

<sup>78</sup> Although not very common in Jharkhand, in the 1995 elections Karamchand Bhagat's son stole the voting box in one electoral ward.



increased competition and deceit, and decreased the harmony in the area. Such people often romanticized back to the pre-1985 era when Karamchand had been the unchallenged contender for MLA.

To vote for an MLA on the basis of the ideology of the party he represents was regarded, by most of the political elite, as an idealistic and foolish move. More rational and logical was voting that followed careful consideration of which MLA candidate was most likely to best serve one's material interests. In keeping with the cuts and commissions, described in the previous chapter, these voting practices are the norm and considered morally acceptable. Moreover, norms exist for the way in which elite party workers align themselves to MLAs. For instance, once support for an MLA candidate is promised, a person is expected to be true to his word. In this way, an elite party worker would be considered to behave in an immoral way if he were to suddenly change his political allegiance overnight.

As much elite investment went into building relations with an MLA candidate, it was thus extremely important which candidate was elected. As a result, and in order to secure more votes for their favoured candidate, members of the political elite sought to influence tribal peasants, and ensure that they viewed the chosen candidate as the most legitimate. To do so the political elite recognized the importance of the *parha mela* as a vital tool. They therefore worked with their chosen MLA to get as many people as possible to attend his *parha mela*.

### **The political economy of understandings**

I have often heard members of the political elite laugh in private about the reluctance of tribal peasants to engage with the state. They laugh too about tribal beliefs in the protective power of the *parha*, and about their 'superstitious' ritual practices. I have often heard them say that it is due to these beliefs that tribal people maintain their 'backwardness'. There is, therefore, a conscious awareness amongst the political elite (of educated non-tribals and tribals) that tribal village peasants hold a different view of the state to themselves. However, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the political

elite encourage these tribal beliefs in order to better access state resources. In a similar manner, as I shall argue in this section, the elite also utilizes the symbolic power of the *parha mela*.

Both Karamchand and Vishwanath, in competing ways, played on the tribal view of the state to encourage tribal peasants to further separate the idea of the state from that of tribal society. In the early days, a large part of Karamchand's popularity amongst tribal peasants resulted from his campaigns to strengthen the *parha*, and ensure that *parha* meetings restarted. As described above, the first major case of these *parha* meetings was against Balku Mian, a Muslim outsider perceived to be weakening tribal society by taking one of its women. Following this case, Karamchand began the first *parha mela* in Bero in 1967. He depicted both the initiation and the success of this first *mela* as that of the *parha* versus the state. He argued that through the first *mela* the state had been defied by the *parha* both because the *parha* breached the state's imposed curfew and because the *mela* was a symbol of tribal protest and resistance to the police firing in Chiri.

When Vishwanath became an MLA, he played on the tribal peasant understanding to ask them to view him as their *dhangar*, their bonded labourer, who would serve them to protect and strengthen tribal society. He accused Karamchand of being corrupted by the state and thus of weakening tribal society. He also accused Karamchand of bringing *rajniti*, politics, into tribal society. A fundamental part of his campaign was to strengthen the twelve and twenty-one *parha* by ensuring regular *parha* meetings at which tribal cases were regularly 'solved'. In the year I was there he was seeking to regain legitimacy as the protector of tribal society through a campaign to rid the area of elephants. Letters of anger and threat had been sent by the *parha* to the District Commissioner, and road blockades had been organized, during which forest guards had been hand-cuffed by Vishwanath's political workers.

By the time I began fieldwork, Vishwanath and Karamchand had both established their own rhetorical argument in competition against each other. Both accused the other of weakening the *parha* through their involvement with the state. Karamchand accused

Vishwanath of beginning the second *parha mela*, in Baridih in 1990, as a tool to win votes to become MLA as the JMM candidate. Moreover, Karamchand claimed that having secured the support of only one *parha raja*, Simone Oraon of twelve *parha*, Vishwanath tried to destroy the traditional, sacred system of *parha raja* selection by using the principles of the modern state's democratic elections to establish another *raja*. Vishwanath had thus made a counterfeit *raja* in 21 *parha* so that his *mela* could be attended by more than one *raja*. Karamchand claimed that democratically chosen *rajas* had no legitimacy since the authenticity of the *raja* was dependent on his hereditary position. Vishwanath, however, defended his position. He said that the idea of democratically elected *rajas* was an age-old tribal tradition – one that preceded MLA elections. Indeed, in his explanation he was careful to disassociate the idea of democracy from the modern state. Democratically electing *rajas*, according to Vishwanath, was an authentic, home-grown tribal custom.<sup>79</sup>

Vishwanath, in turn, accused Karamchand of attempting to destroy the *parha* by disrespecting its gods and goddesses. He said that the horses and elephants ridden in procession in the *parha mela* were the gods and goddesses of the village/s they belonged to and, therefore, were symbols on which only the spiritually endowed *parha rajas*, *pahan*, *paenbharras* or original settlers of the village could sit. Vishwanath accused Karamchand of not only placing ordinary tribals like himself and his family on these gods and goddesses, but of also putting three ex Chief Ministers of Bihar, Abdul Gaftar, Chandra Shekhar Singh and Jagarnath Mishra, as well as an ex-Ranchi Member of Parliament, Shiv Prasad Sahu, on them. The Chief Ministers and the MP were all Bihari high caste or Muslim representatives of the state. Vishwanath Bhagat argued that letting these 'outsiders' ride on the gods and goddesses was the ultimate sign that, instead of being concerned about protecting *parha* society, Karmachand had become corrupted by the power of the state. Vishwanath further accused Karamchand of replacing the sacred *parha* flags, those waved in the *mela* procession, with flags of a political party - Laloo Yadav's *Rashtriya Janata Dal* party which Karamchand had at the time, just joined. In response to the first accusation, Karamchand was careful not to justify his actions by

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<sup>79</sup> See the interviews of Karamchand and Vishwanath in the film Appendix B, 'Heads and Tales'.

claiming the right of the named outsiders to sit on the horses and elephants. Instead he argued that anyone had the right to sit on them. In response to the second accusation, Karamchand once again did not try to legitimise his actions. Instead he just did not repeat them at future *melas*.<sup>80</sup>

In these accusations, therefore, the two MLAs sought to publicly reinforce their beliefs in a clear separation of the idea of the state on the one hand, as a sphere of corruption, politics, pollution and immorality, and the idea of the *parha* on the other hand, as sacred, divine, apolitical and pure. They also sought to undermine the other's power by accusing them of harming the *parha* through association with the state. The most striking aspect about these accusations is that both the MLAs tried to use a discourse about the *parha*, not to legitimise the state, but to legitimise their authenticity in protecting the *parha* from the state. And to do so, both of them depicted the *parha* as anti-state. My suggestion is that these were carefully thought through strategies. Strategies that were developed to better mobilize the support of the majority tribal peasant population. Indeed, the challenge, as Vishwanath once told me, was to mobilise tribal sentiment in order to achieve legitimacy and secure more support. As such, Karamchand, Vishwanath and Ganga all had well-researched ideas of how tribal sentiment about the *parha* could be mobilised in their campaigns to gain MLA seats.

Karamchand, while studying for his BA degree in Anthropology at Ranchi University, had read accounts of the 'lost' tribal traditions in the works of the anthropologists Sarat Chandra Roy and L. P. Vidyarthi. Moreover, as I have outlined, under the influence of Kartik Oroan, he strategically reestablished the *parha* in the Bero area during the late 1960s. Ganga was also well versed in the idea of using 'traditional tribal customs' as a political tool. While studying his BA in Economics and Psychology, he used to frequent the 'Man in India' library set up by Sarat Chandra Roy. Later he worked as a research assistant to the anthropologist Rekha Olip Dhan on her project on the Tana Bhagats at the Tribal Welfare Research Institute. This involved touring the Jharkhandi landscape, an opportunity that he says he used to become known and gain popular support.

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<sup>80</sup> See the interviews of Karamchand and Vishwanath in the film Appendix B, 'Heads and Tales'.

Vishwanth, though not as formally influenced by anthropologists as the other two, had read the works of Vidyarthi and was particularly interested in collecting tribal songs and myths through the older generations in his village. His favorite book was about public sentiment. Although I never saw it, he explained that the point of the book was that, for a regional sentiment to be mobilized, a national sentiment had to be suppressed. To promote a regional sentiment, one had to arouse in local people feelings of a local language, culture, tradition and race that were visibly different to those of the nation. Viswanath claimed, to me, that it was his study and application of this book to the idea of the *parha*, in particular, that had enabled him to work out how to debase the strength of Karamchand.

### **Concluding Remarks: An Inherent Problem of MLA Status**

Extending the propositions of Chapter 3, I have argued here that tribal peasants saw the state and its officials as dangerous, and malign outsiders. They blamed the state for playing a significant role in the weakening of tribal society, and in particular their *parha*. They saw the state as having a growing role in their lives and of threatening to bring the pollution of politics into tribal society. As such, they felt it necessary to be protected from the state and assigned this role to MLAs. In this way, tribal peasants did not perceive MLAs to be part of the state, but instead to be servants of tribal people who had influence in state powers, but remained distinct from them. In contrast, state officials were seen as corrupt outsiders who consumed state resources for personal material benefits. In general, tribal peasants were not interested in the material benefits that could be derived from the state, as consumption of such resources would usually render them immoral in the eyes of wider tribal society.

In opposition to the inherently dangerous and immoral state, tribal peasants saw the *parha* as representing the essence of tribal society. This legitimacy was understood to be derived from the spiritual world. As such, the *parha* was seen to be a part of tribal

society, whereas the state was seen to belong outside of it. In the face of the waning strength of the *parha*, an experience directly attributed to waxing power of modern state, tribal peasants saw the resurrection and strengthening of the *parha* to be vital.

The protection of the *parha* and its *mela* thus became important political tools that MLAs could employ to gain the support of tribal peasants. The MLAs boosted their own legitimacy by depicting the 'traditional structure' of the *parha* as authentic, local, timeless, and in opposition to the state. They recreated the ideological boundary between the state and the *parha*. In this way, as Mosse suggests in his work on irrigation systems in Ramanand and Sivangi, 'a stronger idea of the state has evoked stronger ideas of "the community"' (2001: 180) or, in the case of the Tapu area, a stronger idea of the *parha*. However, in this contested process, contending MLAs have in fact recreated and changed the *parha* so that the 'traditional structure' was not traditional at all.<sup>81</sup>

Extending the argument of Chapter 3, I have also proposed that in the Tapu area MLAs have also had to engage with a very different understanding of the state – that of the political elite. The political elite understand that the idea of the state is to serve the public good, but have little commitment to it. As such the primary purpose of their engagement with the state was material benefit. While it is understood that an MLA represents the democratic ideal of the state, political elites support the MLA candidate that they feel will best enable them to derive material benefit from the state. In turn, the MLAs require the political elite to help ensure people in their constituency support them, believe in their legitimacy and, ultimately, vote for them.

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<sup>81</sup> This point is little realised in policy debates in Jharkhand and India more generally that promote the idea of *parha* as the authentic, traditional system of socio-political governance. This idea is also central to the discourse reproduced among international development agencies ranging from the World Bank to the Department for International Development (UK) to the NGOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid advocating that democratisation take into account traditional structures of governance. As is clear in the case of the *parha*, and is well argued by West and Kloeck-Jensen (1999) traditional authority is not traditional at all.

In managing these different visions of the state, there are two inherent problems for MLAs. The first is that, in seeking to please supporters from the political elite, the MLA is seen by tribal peasants as betraying them through becoming corrupted by the material resources from the state. The danger this poses is exaggerated by the fact that the success of each MLA candidate often rests on his capacity to devalue the other's ability to protect the *parha*. The way this is often done is by claiming a candidate has overstepped the boundary of the state and the *parha*, that he has become a man of the outside world, corrupted by the state, and is therefore in danger of weakening the *parha*.

Indeed, it was through this critique that Vishwanath challenged Karamchand. Vishwanath claimed that, while Karamchand might have started off with good intentions, nearly 30 years of contact with outsiders had polluted the man and he had come to resemble those dangerous aliens. As Vishwanath pointed out, Karamchand's life style had changed so that he now was no longer a simple tribal peasant. He had built himself a two floor brick mansion with electricity and running water, bought several cars and dressed like a politician in white *kurta* and *pyjama*. Indeed, he no longer wanted to live in a simple mud hut or wear the tribal peasant *lungi* (wrap around cloth). Vishwanath insisted that having corrupted himself, Karamchand was dangerous to the wider tribal society, as he held the potential to destroy the sacred and timeless tribal *parha*.

After Vishwanath became MLA in 1995, he was faced with this same problem of mediating the boundary between the political elite and the tribal peasants. Indeed, he too did not succeed for long as he lost the 2000 elections. In fact, in his time as MLA Vishwanath had built himself a large brick house, bought two cars and started wearing the politician clothes of white *kurta* and *pyjama*. The result was that tribal peasants came to believe that Vishwanath, like Karamchand, had crossed the boundary of the tribal community, and thus could no longer be trusted as a protector of tribal life.

In fact, most tribal peasants in Tapu are now disillusioned by MLAs. There was once great faith in Karamchand, and then in Vishwanath. However, tribal peasants now

believe that men who stand as MLAs are too easily corrupted. In this vein, in the last election, when Dev Kumar Dhan won the MLA seat, the political elite attributed the victory to sheer booth capture and bogus voting. There was also a very low voter turnout. Moreover, many tribal peasants have now come to the opinion that voting is now useless: 'we do not have time to vote; we have cattle to graze and crops to farm.'

The second inherent problem of MLA status in the Tapu area is that MLAs cannot gain legitimacy from the spiritual realm of the *parha*. Indeed if an MLA tries to do so, he will be accused of trying to destroy the *parha*.

It is thus hardly surprising that the person who in fact most successfully mediates the boundary between the state and tribal society in the Bero area, is the king of the tribal sacred realm, the twelve *parha raja*, Simone Oraon. Simone had endless visitors from the 'outside' world – NGOs, state officers, missionaries, journalists from Delhi, even a geography PhD student from Cambridge! He used his repeated nominations for some American 'International Man of the World' book as claims to his fame. Successful at getting contracts from the Block Development Office, Simone had acquired one of the only tractors in the villages south of Bero on a Block loan. He received development money to build several irrigation canals in his village as well as a dam, and had received money from the Block to build two houses on the *Indira Awas* Scheme for those 'Below Poverty Line'. However, despite Simone's significant interaction with the state, his legitimacy as a *parha* king was never challenged by tribal peasants in Tapu.

One reason was that he was careful not to consume, or rather, to appear to consume, in a way that would make him akin to a person of the outside world. He made a point of travelling bare-foot between villages (not even riding a bicycle), carrying only his cloth bag (*jola*) and his black umbrella, and he dressed in a simple wrap around cloth at all times. He slept on the floor, ate simple tribal peasant food and always worked very hard as a farmer, farming his own crop. Of his acquisitions from the state, he claimed that the tractor belonged to the *parha* and that the dam and canals were for communal use. He was also careful to make his *Indira Awas* houses look like mud houses.



Another reason for Simone's success in mediating between the two realms was that, unlike Karamchand and Vishwanath, Simone never gave reason to be seen as a person influenced by the state. Simone explicitly stressed that although he was offered candidacy on several occasions, he would never stoop to become an MLA. He said that his only aim was to keep tribal culture and tradition alive and that MLAs could easily get corrupted. He hence legitimized his initial support for Karamchand, and then his later shift to Vishwanath, by saying that as the first threatened tribal society, it was essential for him to shift allegiance to the next man who he had hoped would better protect tribal society.

Simone's strongest weapon, however, was one that no MLA could acquire. This was his sacred, spirit-endowed, status as a *parha raja*. He knew this well and was quick to take every opportunity to highlight the supernatural qualities of his persona - those attributed to the spirits who made him the king of the *parha*. Amongst his claims was that he had survived two falls into wells, two dam collapses, a chase by a tiger, and two snake bites. He also claimed he could make the simple jungle leaf *futkul* (eaten in times when food was scarce) taste like meat. Unlike Simone, however, MLAs in this part of India<sup>82</sup> cannot claim authority for their status from the spiritual realm.

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<sup>82</sup> This is of course, different to the descriptions of elected politicians in other parts of India. For instance a key feature of the 1990s Hindutva processions, have been politicians legitimising their authority by acting as gods or goddesses. The most famous of these cases is perhaps the time when the BJP launched the 'pilgrimage for unanimity' in protest against the V.P. Singh government decision to implement the job reservation policy for low castes recommended by the Mandal Commission, and BJP leader L.K. Advani posed as Ram and bend his bow against V.P. Singh the demon or Ravana (Assayag, 1995). But there are many more examples of such attempts. Michelluti (2002) describes the portrayal of Yadav politicians as 'hero gods' in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Peabody describes the events of 1986 in Kota, Rajasthan, when a Congress MLA fights representative of the old princely regime to play the role of Ram slaying Ravan in the open-air pageant play of Ram Lila (Peabody, 1997). Why this aspect of legitimizing elected politicians is so different in Jharkhand to other parts of India is a comparative question that I can only guess at. My material is similar to Gell's understanding of the Bastar tribals who wanted to obstruct the state and attempted this through the Dasara ritual. I would suggest that the dissociation of the state from society as I have shown through the *parha melā* is the particular result of the processes of the state in tribal areas.

## Chapter 5: Jharkhand State Threatened by the Love of Labour: Seasonal Migration to the Brick Kilns

### Migration as a Problem

Demands for a separate state of Jharkhand were presented in 1928 to the Simon Commission and later, in 1954, to the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC). The basis of the submission to the SRC by this Jharkhand Movement was that the tribal dominated communities of greater Jharkhand had long been a majority in the region, that tribal livelihoods and way of life was under threat by outside interests and *dikus* (outsiders), and that the territory should thus be reclaimed in the name of the true 'sons of the soil' (Weiner, 1988).

Jharkhand finally gained independence in November 2000. However, as Corbridge (2002) argues, the break-up of Bihar hardly signalled a success of India's democracy - the reasons had far more to do with political bargains between a restricted number of elite actors than with pressures from below. The *Bharaty Janata Party* (BJP) and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in New Delhi, that granted Jharkhand independence, had the intention of weakening Laloo Yadav and the *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) in Bihar, as the separation of Jharkhand from Bihar would deprive the latter of substantial sales and excise revenues and also subsidised electricity provision (Corbridge, 2002: 57). Moreover, when the BJP came to power in Jharkhand, it did so with the votes of 'outsiders', *dikus* and *sadans*, reflecting the views of those BJP politicians who had been advocating that, as Jharkhand was no longer numerically or economically dominated by tribals, the separate state should be called Vananchal (land of forests in Hindi), rather than Jharkhand.

The cleavage of Jharkhand from Bihar was a point of celebration for the long-standing activists and well-wishers of Jharkhand. However, they see the particular way in which it happened, and that little regard was paid to the tribal communities, as undermining the

idea of Jharkhand as a state in which tribals would be protected. Angered and disappointed, Jharkhandi activists are driven more than ever to 'protect' tribal livelihood and cultures. In this chapter I want to look at one aspect of this protection. That is the campaign against informal sector seasonal casual labour migration from Jharkhand to the brick kilns of other Indian states.

At least 47% of Tapu's adult population has ventured at some time to the brick kilns in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. For reasons I will elaborate later, in general, the Yadavs who are the descendants of the old landlords do not go to the brick kilns. It is mainly the tribal peasant population that migrates. In Tapu in 2000-2001, 36% of its Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste population above the age of 16 went to work in the brick kilns – a total of 73 migrants, of whom 47% were male and 53% female. They join a stream of people who seasonally migrate across the Indian landscape in the name of work. Although it is difficult to estimate how many such people migrate each year out of Jharkhand, there is consensus that this figure is at least several hundred thousand.

Jharkhandi activists claim to be upset by such informal sector seasonal migration, because it is the outcome of extreme poverty, where the migrants have little choice in their home areas but to migrate for survival. In doing so, the activists claim that the migrants are not only leaving the rich glory of their home traditions, but are being forced into the hands of exploitation and oppression at every stage in their journey from the labour contractor at home, to the managers and bosses in the brick kilns. Take for example, the concerns of a journalist on the *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi.

'Dozens of tribal labourers of Angada have returned after having bitter experiences of financial, mental, emotional and physical torture in the brick kilns of West Bengal ... Till date dozens of people are working as bonded labourers under the owners of brick manufacturing units ... They are forced to work ten to twelve hours per day ... If they refuse to work or voice their opinions against the atrocities of the kiln owners, they are tortured and locked in a room and beaten mercilessly ... They

are warned that if they try to flee away, they will be burnt alive in the manufacturing kiln.' (21 November 2000).

Everyone these days seems to be upset for some reason or another about migrant and especially seasonal migrant labour. In more academic enquiry, seasonal migrant labour has conventionally been seen as the result of extreme poverty where migrants have to leave their home area for the dry six months of the year to survive (Shah, Bose, Hargopal and Kannan, 1990), often in response to environmental crisis (Gadgil and Guha, 1995). Such migration has been seen as problematic by structuralist approaches that draw on the work of Meillasoux (1976) and others to stress the advantages of migrant labour to capitalist production (Breman, 1985, 1994, 1996; Standing, 1985; Mukherji, 1985). It emphasises that migrants do not consciously opt for departure (Breman, 1994). In neo-classical models on the other hand, the migrant is seen as a rational actor choosing between various options and striving for an economic optimum (Lal, 1989). Those who have a more complex account of reasons for migrating still prioritise migration as a defensive coping strategy covering debts and extreme economic vulnerability (Mosse, 2003). Although others have objected that the migrant is not just a 'homo economicus', and take into consideration social, religious and 'ethnic factors', their accounts rarely prioritise such perspectives and instead argue that for most migrants, it is economic choices made between alternatives that drive such migration (De Haan, 1994, Rogaly and Coppard, 2003). Those that integrate the importance of social and cultural contexts of migration do so more in their analysis of change in the areas that migrants go to (Appadurai, 1996) or in their accounts of the effects of migration back at home (Gardener, 1995), than in their considerations for the reasons why people migrate. Although some accounts are more sophisticated (Mosse, 2003), the academic consensus on migration appears similar to those of Jharkhandi activists in constructing, as Spencer rightly points out, migration as 'a problem' (Spencer, 2003).

In this Chapter I suggest that from the point of view of those who migrate it makes little sense to understand their migration in terms of economic compulsion alone. I argue that in Tapu seasonal migration to the brick kilns cannot be understood without keeping

central the social and cultural context of the migrants. I argue that for most of those who migrate, brick kilns are seen as a space of social and cultural freedom from a more constrained village environment. Many of those who migrate do so to escape temporarily from a problem back at home, to live out prohibited amorous relationships, to explore a new country and to gain independence from their parents. Whereas opponents of this migration see the kilns as a threat to ideas of purity and regulation of the social and sexual self, for many of those that migrate, brick kilns are seen as a place where people are 'free'. In the conclusion I suggest that the anti-migration campaign is really about redefining the borders of Jharkhand as a tribal state and constructing a 'purer', *adivasi* citizen of the state.

### **Escaping to the Brick Kilns**

I want to take you first to one dark starry night in August 2001. It was the run up to the rainy season festival of *Karma* and I could hear the distant beat of the drums as the partygoers of the village danced in the *akhra*, the village dancing circle (Plate 12). Suddenly there was a commotion in my courtyard. Somra Munda told me that it was the second night that his father, old Burababa, had not been seen. He had just found out from his father's friend that Burababa was by now well on his way to the plains of Jonepur, Uttar Pradesh to join his second son Mangra to spend the rest of the year at the brick kilns. (See Figure 6 for a Genealogy of Burababa's family).

Somra was upset that his old father had run away. The year that had passed had proved a frustrating one. Burababa, by then well over 60, and against Somra's wishes, had chosen to work as a *dhangar* (a kind of bonded labourer) in the house of a Yadav man who was a descendant of the landlord of the village. Somra had wanted his father to live under his own roof, to feed and clothe him as all good sons are supposed to. Somra needed his father to look after the family's two oxen, two cows and three calves, and to work in their irrigated fields. Yet Burababa had wanted to work for the Yadav, sleep wherever he felt like at night, eat at the Yadav's and earn a meagre Rs1200 for the year. With the

beginning of the rains and the rice-transplanting season, Somra had finally convinced Burababa to leave the Yadav and come home.

The rice-transplanting season is the great festival period of the year. The village is a hive of activity. All the seasonal migrants have returned from the brick kilns. Day in day out, the mornings involve hard work. The men exchange labour to plough and prepare each other's water-logged fields. The women, with their legs coated in oil, and their *sarees* hitched up to their knees, sing and joke as they sow rice seedlings in each other's fields (Plate 13). The children have mud baths and catch crabs and snails to be later fried as snacks. In the afternoons the high spirits of the fields are carried into the courtyards and houses of the village. The owners of the fields that were sown on that particular day host a luncheon for the men and serve *hadia*, rice beer, wine made from the *mahua* flower, and nibbles of fried lentils and wild mushrooms to the women. The party begins at noon and continues into the evening. Those who have energy to spare, and those (especially the youth) who have been saving it for the evening, then move on with their singing and drumming into the *akhra* where the night is danced away. At 4.00 in the morning the new day begins with new fields to be ploughed and sown and a new party to be hosted.

Like many, for Burababa the rains are a time for merriment and bonding through both very hard work and dancing and drinking with others in the village. But his return to his son's house at the beginning of the rice-transplanting season had become a great strain on old Burababa due to the restrictions imposed on him. Several years ago, Somra had transformed himself and his immediate family to become part of a group of Mundas who call themselves Bhagats and who consider themselves as a class above the impurity and decadence of the Munda households in which they were born. Somra's bitter memories of his childhood are dominated by moving from house to house as a *dhangar*, Burababa's lack of concern about providing his son with a school education, and the development of a fondness of the local village brew. At some point, Somra ended up working as a *dhangar* in a nearby village where he fell in love with his Munda employer's beautiful daughter, Ambli. At the end of the tenth year that Somra was there,

Ambli's father arranged her marriage to a man from a neighbouring village. However, almost as soon as she had left her natal village, Ambli was back with Somra.

Somra now felt the need to prove himself worthy to Ambli's parents who had given their other daughters far up the social scale to soldiers and policemen. Therefore, Somra decided to follow Ambli's father's footsteps and transform himself into a Bhagat. He had intensive training in the dark of the night for several months in a secret sect of a secret guru. And so Somra came to join a group of Mundas who live under the strict ritual of secret prayers, who do not eat food cooked by others, whose diet is entirely vegetarian save for sacrificial meat, who have given up on all forms of liquor unless they are the foreign, or *English*, varieties of alcohol, beautifully sealed and packed in bottles labelled 'Old Monk' or 'Royal Challenge', and who by the process of this cleansing and ritual training derive secret powers to cure minor cases of illness and re-guide spirits that had been wrongly directed. Save for the whisky and rum, in many ways Somra's lifestyle became closer to some Brahmin families that I knew in neighbouring villages than to the less strictly regulated practices of his brother Mangra or his sister Jitia whose habits Somra today thoroughly disapproves of - although of course in many ways they reflect many of his former life patterns.

Somra had for instance many years ago arranged the marriage of Mangra to a suitable girl only to find that Mangra had that year brought home from the kilns a girl from the Ho tribe of South Jharkhand. His Ho partner had difficulty with Nagpuria, the local language, and felt that she was treated antagonistically as an outsider by others in the village. Unlike most brick kiln migrants, Mangra has since chosen to live at the factory almost all year. He brought home his children and wife only occasionally for a few weeks in the rains. He thus chose not to farm the fields that are his legitimate share of family land and not to live under the watchful eye of his elder brother Somra.

Jitia, Somra's sister, had also been married off to a man from a neighbouring village only to come back a year later declaring her love and determination to live with a married man in her natal village, Minktu. After one night in the *akhra*, several years ago,

Minktu and Jitia, had been engaged in a series of secret rendezvous. On Jitia's return, Minktu left his first wife and child. The new couple ran away to the kilns to escape the accusations of dishonour from the family back at home and came back the following season, Jitia full with her first child.

Before returning to Burababa's run away escapade let me also tell you of Somra's remaining sibling, Budhwa. Ambli (Somra's partner) had a paternal cousin, Chotki, who spent all her days at their house and who fell in love with Budhwa. Chotki refused to go back to her paternal village and eventually ran away to the brick kilns with Budhwa where they could consummate their love in peace. After two children, the couple decided that they would stop going to the kilns, look after their fields at home and follow in Somra's footsteps to become Bhagats.

Although Budhwa's fate was slightly different to that of Mangra and Jitia, what is common in the stories of all of Somra's siblings is that at some point migrating to work seasonally in brick factories provided an escape mechanism from what must have been the claustrophobic restrictions of the desires of their brother and perhaps others in the village. So Burababa's escape that rainy season was in part only a repetition of what had happened in that courtyard several times before.

When Burababa stopped working for the Yadav, he returned to a strictly vegetarian, strictly non-alcoholic life in Somra's house. This was too restricted a lifestyle for old Burababa. Night after night, I had seen and heard the disapproval of Somra and his wife when Burababa would steal away to a different courtyard to enjoy the company of his friends. And day after day, I had seen Burababa's quietness in the confines of our own courtyard grow. Eventually this culminated in the old man, at a time when only a few people remain at the brick kilns, making a secret arrangement with a labour contractor and leaving for the kilns of Jonepur.



## **The Misery of the Daisy Brick Factory?**

I was struck at the contrast between more activist and scholarly views on seasonal labour migration and what the possibility of escaping to the brick kilns might have meant for Burababa. It might appear that Burababa's story is an exception because of his puritanical son Somra. However, as I will show for many other people in different ways, life in the village can be restricting. From the stories of migration that I was hearing and seeing unfolding, I began to wonder if those writing about, and campaigning against, migration might perhaps have overlooked the possibility that for many of those who migrate today, such seasonal migration also represents a form of freedom from the repetitive rituals of a more socially constrained village life. To investigate this hypothesis I went to spend a week in the Daisy Brick Factory in West Bengal.

It was easy, I could see, to come to the conclusion that the motivation of labour to seasonally migrate to such kilns could only be the result of conditions of extreme poverty back at home. The Daisy Brick Factory, claiming to be the largest of approximately 350 such brick factories in Hoogly District, employed a labour force of about 800 people and produced around 500000 bricks a year.

The main entrance to the factory skirted a six-floor mansion. This was one of the houses of the factory owner that he eventually wanted to convert into a five star luxury tourist resort complete with a swimming pool and golf course stretching to the Ganges banks. Adjacent to this building was the crowded labour camp of about 200 brick shacks of six metres by three metres in size with low, slanting tile roofs. Each shack housed about four people, had a line for hanging clothes, and a coal-fired stove. At one end of the camp, three taps supplied ground water to the camp. There were no sanitation or bathing facilities, and although the brick furnace a few metres away was floodlit at night, there was no electricity supplied to the camp (Plate 14).

Most of the labourers work three shifts of hard labour, six days a week under the beating heat: 5.30am to 8.00am, 10.00am to noon and 2.00pm to 6.00pm. While low-caste

Bihari labour specialize in moulding bricks and West Bengali labour extracted clay, Jharkhandi tribal and low-caste labour is famously recruited to such brick kilns for the heavy task of loading and unloading bricks to and from the furnace, trucks and brick stores. In the Daisy Brick factory Jharkhandi labour accounted for almost half the labour force. Factory owners told me that local Bengali labour would never do the loading and unloading work that is assigned to labour from Jharkhand as carrying bricks requires great physical endurance and is, moreover, regarded by the local labour as a menial task.

Jharkhandi women do the heavy work of balancing up to eight uncooked bricks at a time on their heads (Plate 16). Men either receive these bricks from women to line the furnace (Plate 15), or carry the even greater load of up to sixteen cooked bricks on a bamboo sling across their shoulders. Payment is at piece rates. Labourers expect that, subtracting living costs, hard-working couples will bring home Rs8000-9000 for the six month season. Such couples are talked of with admiration and respect. It is far more common to hear stories of individuals who only managed Rs2000. Although it is likely that the major reason for this shortfall is cheating by employers and contractors, as I will elaborate shortly, the explanation labourers give for this low total wage is that the individuals were too busy having fun and did not work hard enough.

### **The Love of Labour**

It is difficult to imagine that the motivation to endure such hard working and living conditions could be anything other than the extreme poverty encountered at home. I wondered if the stories about the fun of brick kiln migration I had heard back in Tapu were a consequence of the possibility that, when at home, migrants wax lyrical about the place of migration simply because they did not want to admit that the brick kilns are actually awful and that the real reason for migrating is the economic constraint of staying back at home?

Of this hypothesis I had reasons to be suspicious on two accounts. For example, a few people from every Maheli household in Tapu went to the kilns despite the fact that all could earn just as much making bamboo baskets back in the village. And for those with fewer skills to offer who may also not have had productive land, there was always contract labour required in and around the village. These factors meant that reasons for migrating due to economic constraints of life in the village were not so convincing.

As a result of the dramas that I saw unfold before me in the labour camp at the Daisy Brick Factory, I was also suspicious of the argument that life in the place of migration is far from its glorious representation back at home. I was living in the one of the five houses from Tapu – a shack of four, unmarried and unrelated girls who, despite their parents pleading with them to stay in the village, had all left for the brick kilns. The eldest, 20 year old Shila, had, in fact, disappeared from the village overnight without her parent's consent. In the winter months disappearing children were a common phenomenon in Tapu. Although parents usually got upset that their children had left without saying, they rarely worried about where they had gone. It was assumed that they had taken off to some brick kiln and that they would hear from them in due course.

By the time I arrived at the factory, Shila had been there at least three months. I was struck that in this time she had transformed from a tatty blue school skirt and blouse clad girl to an elegant woman dressed in a *saree*. Being the eldest of the four girls who lived in the shack, she was also proud to show me that she had learnt to cook in the kilns. However, these aspects of claiming an adulthood were the least of my surprises. It also rapidly transpired that the relationship between the labour contractor, Jeevan, and Shila had turned into something more than just platonic. In fact, as was common in Tapu between younger brothers and their elder sister-in-laws, I often found Jeevan's younger brother flirting, teasing and joking with Shila. In the week I was there, some complications had developed in Jeevan and Shila's romance.

Jeevan was already in his twelfth year of marriage and although his wife and child were back in the village, the other girls did not think him a suitable match for Shila. They had

found Shila a quiet young Ranchi boy in the camp who they referred to as '*bhatu*', a Nagpuria term for 'brother-in-law'. The Saturday before I arrived, there had been a long evening of drinking and dancing in the celebrations of Saraswati Puja at the camp. That night Shila had served *hadia* to the *bhatu* and Jeevan had danced with a female labour contractor from a neighbouring village. As a result a jealous tension had developed between Shila and Jeevan. The second evening I was there, Jeevan disappeared with his shiny, new, Rs300 black puffer jacket into the market for a few hours. At around the same time the female labour contractor, in lipstick and high heels, left the camp. After his return from the market that night, Shila began to taunt Jeevan that he ought to leave his door open that night so that his '*mal*', his property, could easily slip in. The next night Shila invited the *bhatu* back to the house where he quietly sat in a corner. All the other girls crowded around him giggling and joking. Jeevan was meanwhile getting increasingly infuriated. When the *bhatu* left, Jeevan shouted at the girls to shut up. He told them it was ridiculous how the house had turned into a 'free zone' and that they were ruining their reputation. He threatened Shila that he would send a message to her father back in Tapu announcing exactly what she had been up to. Jeevan's outburst left an uncomfortable silence in the house. That night and the rest of the following day, Shila did not eat in protest, trying to make the point that Jeevan had hurt her. On Sunday, a holiday, everyone dressed in their best clothes and while some went to explore the Hoogly Bridge and the Planetarium in Calcutta, I went with Jeevan, Shila and a few other people on a tour of the 1599 Roman Catholic Church in the nearby town of Bandel. After gazing in awe at the statues and pictures on the wall and climbing to the roof to get an aerial view of the Ganges banks and the brick factories that line them, Jeevan bought Shila a necklace that happened to have a silver cross (Plate 17). In the evening Shila made chicken curry for Jeevan, his brother and the rest of the girls. After a few cups of *hadia*, interactions between Shila and Jeevan appeared to have returned to a rosy veneer.

Shila and Jeevan's affair was only one of the flirtatious relationships between young men and women that I sensed in a week at the brick kilns. Amorous relationships are pursued with ease in the kilns because most young people choose to go to different kilns

from their siblings or other immediate kin. While joking and flirting between men and women was common as they worked, it was in the confines of the labour camp that amorous relationships were expressed more fully. There I was surprised to find unmarried men and women openly flirted with each other, sat on each others laps, held hands, lay next to each other on the floor or in beds – the kinds of expressions and actions that I had never seen happen openly in Tapu. I understood then what young people in Tapu meant when they repeatedly told me that the great thing about the kilns was that life there could be lived ‘freely’. To some of the youth from Tapu, brick kilns provided a convenient temporary space, away from the social authority of and responsibility to immediate family back at home.

To understand why people felt constrained in the village it is necessary to know something of the sexual norms of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste people in Tapu. Unlike for the Girasias of Rajasthan (Unnithan-Kumar, 1997) or the Muria of Bastar (Gell, 1992), divorce and postmarital affairs in Tapu are now, if they ever were, not readily accepted. Nevertheless they do occur and often end in secondary unions. In Tapu I calculated that of the 83 married ST or SC men in the village, approximately 30% of the total, were no longer with their first spouses. Thus people who begin affairs after marriage or who want to continue premarital relationships once they are married, as in Somra’s sister’s case, can more easily do so by going to the kilns with their lovers. In at least 50% of the secondary unions of ST and SC Tapu men, it was migration to the brick kilns that had enabled the development of the second relationship.

Premarital sexual relations were, in general, common in the village. The restriction on such relations, however, is that they must not become permanent. Marital partners must not be of the boy or girl’s choice but must be chosen by their parents. Thus although it was not necessary to be a virgin, marital partners should not have previously engaged in sexual relations with each other. In fact, some of my more sceptical informants even suggest that this is the main reason why parents prefer brides for their boys from outside the village – to ensure the potential partners had not had sexual relations. As was the case for Somra and two of his brothers, a common tactic for premarital lovers who want

to make their relationship more permanent is to go to the kilns and return after the woman is several months pregnant. In the village early pregnancies of illicit affairs are aborted but childbirth legitimises illicit affairs.

Another restriction on premarital sexual relations is that older generations must not know of them. This is the reason why parents hold contradictory views about their children running away to the kilns. On the one hand they expressed being upset not just because a child's departure meant one less hand in the fields, but also because they knew the labour camps at the kilns provided a space for developing amorous affairs. On the other hand, many parents understood the position of the youth – they had been in the same situation themselves and had often met their own marital partners in the labour camps. Thus when parents expressed displeasure and hurt when their children decided to take off to the kilns, it was usually on the basis of the *idea* that as parents they ought not to endorse the sexual freedom that everyone knew brick kiln migration represents.

This is not to say, however, that every young person who goes to the kiln engages in amorous relationships. The important point is that the ability to explore amorous relationships makes brick kiln migration attractive. This 'freedom' is part of a broader process of growing up that brick kilns symbolised to youth. Important in this transition was a stress by the youth that the process was an individual, exploratory one – this meant going to kilns without any kin. However, as Parry (2003) remarks of long distance labour migrants to Bhilai, there is a contradiction between the actor's perspective of individual autonomy and what is actually going on.<sup>83</sup> Migrants who go to a kiln usually do so with a group of people from surrounding villages, if not the same village, and the movement is one that had been done over and over again by others the years before.

Another important factor in the transition to adulthood was earning an individual income that did not have to be given back to parents. Whereas earnings in the village usually went straight back to parents, kiln money was physically out of reach of parents. This

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<sup>83</sup> Parry also draws attention to this contradiction in Wolf's (1992) data of factory women in Java.

income provided cash that was used by girls to buy and wear *sarees*, sandals, jewellery and make-up and marked a transition from bare-footed girls into women. Boys returned to the village in the rains proudly showing off a new colourful shirt, a fancy cap, a glitzy watch or a blasting radio, and telling stories of the zoos, planetariums and museums of Calcutta in a polished brand of foreign Hindi, rather than the inferior village Nagpuria. They saw themselves as transforming from village lads to 'macho, modern' men. Indeed young people returning with such symbolic goods (and stories) inspired other young people in Tapu to follow their example the next year.

In recent years, in the face of increasing *sanskritisation*, Christianisation, 'Jharkhandisation' (addressed in the conclusion of this chapter) and 'Naxalisation' (addressed in the next chapter) of tribal people, it is possible that the space of sexual freedom provided by the brick kilns has become more important. I had heard several stories of how many years ago increasing Brahminical influence in the area had led to the disappearance of the *dhumkuria*. The *dhumkuria*, better known in Muria areas as the *ghotul* (cf. Elwin, 1947 and Gell, 1992), was a village dormitory reputed to be a space for the development of premarital amorous affairs where post pubescent unmarried youth would sleep and participate in song and dance. In similar fashion, over the last few years, in villages where the extreme right-wing Hindu Nationalist party the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh has been active, the *akhra* - the village dancing circle - is being closed because of the sexual encounters it encourages. As more tribal people like Somra become Bhagats, Tana Bhagats, Hindus, Christians, or join the MCC, to many other tribal people the village becomes increasingly repressive, making the opportunity to temporarily migrate away from this environment into a 'freer' space appear all the more attractive.

From the individual narratives reported by others studying migration in India, there is further evidence that to those who seasonally migrate, the ability to do so often represents a form of freedom. Take for example Bailey's case of the young Kond man who impregnated a girl in Baderi, Orissa and chose to run away to the Tea Plantations in Assam rather than hold a ceremony of purification (1960: 22). Similarly, Chopra's story

of how migration to Punjab allowed an Oraon man from Ranchi district to elope with an unsuitable girl from a lower status family (1995: 159). Rogaly et al describe the case of a woman separated from her second husband who is able to more conveniently have an affair with the labour contractor by migrating with him from Puruliya to the rice fields in Bardhaman (2003). Parry talks of how casual contract and migrant labour in Bhilai enables flirtations, sexual encounters and amorous adventures (2001: 25). In Breman's work too there is evidence that seasonal migration also provides a means of escape for labourers – for example, a young man running away to Calcutta from his Uttar Pradesh village after a fight with his father (1996: 85).

### **More Reasons for Migrating**

That not all the migrants from Tapu at the Daisy Brick Factory, however, had come to escape family arguments, to live out prohibited sexual relations, or for the fun and games of the kilns. I want to briefly look at each of the other four houses (of the five) from Tapu to highlight some of the reasons that might have brought their residents to the Daisy Brick Factory that year.

In the neighbouring house to the four girls that I stayed with, lived an old man who had run away from his son's household under very similar circumstances to Burababa, with whose escape I began this chapter. He hoped that when he returned things would have changed and his son would treat him better.

Pera, a Munda man in his mid thirties, his Oraon wife Sanicharwa and their son lived in the third house from Tapu. Pera had been going to the kilns for the last seven years and the reasons, he says, had changed over time. Initially, going to the kilns was a means of escaping from his father. Pera says that from the age of six he was used to being a *dhangar* in a neighbouring village and when he returned to live in Tapu, he was continuously arguing with his father. The kilns, he says, provided a few months of relief away from home. When his father died, Pera inherited some land and livestock and was



considering staying in Tapu all year round. However, soon after his father's death, Pera's elder brother was accused of a murder and was put in jail. Pera and his brothers had to mortgage their lands to pay for the court hearings that followed. Pera thus continued going to the kilns to earn money to pay off the debt. At around this time Pera fell in love with Sanicharwa, an Oraon woman at the kilns. As their inter-tribe union would be frowned upon heavily in the village, she was another incentive for him to continue going to the kilns.

By 2001 things had again changed - Pera had not only released enough of his family's land in the village to stay there all year round but also had a baby that made his union with Sanicharwa more legitimate back in Tapu. Pera was sure that that year he wanted to finally settle back in Tapu. He had spent the months before migrating in 2001 trying to convince Sanicharwa that with a young son life would be more comfortable back in village where they had a bigger house, livestock to look after and fields to cultivate.

However, while Sanicharwa recognised that in the kilns she would spend most of her time looking after her baby in the beating heat under a tiny roof of tiles, she was convinced that life in the kilns was better as nobody paid attention to the fact that she was from a lower status tribe. For her, as I had heard from most migrants back in Tapu who rave on about life in the brick factories, at the kilns 'all people are equal' and people forget the rules of 'purity and pollution'. While it was clear that in the kilns this was not always the case (for example Jharkhandi labour rarely mixed with low caste Biharis), it was also true that in most kilns, there would only be a few people from the home village with whom the contexts of village inequality and purity-pollution could be re-experienced. Sanicharwa's feeling that all people are equal at the kilns was a consequence of the ability to atomise one's life in the camp. For her, the main reason to continue to migrate was that, in comparison to the claustrophobic village environment where her lower tribe status subjected her to a subordinating gaze, she felt that in the kilns people were not as concerned with tribal hierarchy.

In the house next to Pera, lived his father's brother's son, forty-five year old Samu, his second wife Anita and their six-year old son. Anita was convinced that she preferred life in the kilns to that in the village and would want to continue going there until she was so old and frail she could no longer do the work. They were another exceptional family that had been going to the kilns for more than ten years. As with Pera's family, their reasons had changed over time and I do not have space to go into detail here. However, the most important factor for Anita in continuing to go to the kilns is that back in Tapu she was repeatedly accused of being a witch and bringing bad luck to others in the village. To her and Samu the brick kilns thus provided a means of escape from the malicious gossip and accusations of witchcraft back in the village.

Fatra, a middle-aged Munda man and his fourteen year-old daughter lived in the fifth house of Tapu people at the Daisy Brick yard, while his wife and four other children were back in the village looking after the fields and livestock. His family had suffered a spate of bad luck with malaria in Tapu, had spent much money on sacrificial chickens and on medicine given by the healers, and as a result of these expenses had to give his fields to a person in Tapu as collateral to borrow cash. Fatra said he was at the factory that year for the sole purpose of earning enough money to pay his debts and release his fields from their temporary owner. As I listened to his life-history, I realized that in some years he went to the kilns while in others he stayed in Tapu. He explained that it was not always necessary to go the kilns as by tilling his own fields and working as contract labour in the village area, the family could get by. However, in years when their financial situation was not very stable, as in 2001, it was safer to go to the kilns where he was sure to save money. In the same way I had heard many other people in Tapu explain, he said that in the village money flowed away from you very rapidly. It was always too tempting to spend it on drink and celebration with relatives and friends. He held the common perception that in the kilns one saves more not necessarily because one earns more but because one spends less as a result of the fact that money was only given at the end of the season. For him the brick kilns provided a space away from home where he could concentrate on doing hard labour away from the distraction of friends

and relatives so that at the end of the season he could bring back a big lump sum to release his lands.

It is clear that all the migrants from Tapu were motivated to come to the Daisy Brick Factory that year by a range of different reasons. However, the most striking feature of all these migrants' stories is how rarely migration to the brick kilns was seen as an economic necessity and how often it was perceived of in terms of the temporary need to be in a space away from the village where the migrant could lead a more autonomous life. The brick kilns provided a space from home where migrants could get away from constraints in the village: from social prohibitions placed by immediate kin, from fights with parents or siblings, from what was seen as a narrow-minded and oppressive village environment, or merely to get away from social obligations. For six months of the year at the kilns, migrants could lead what they saw as a more individual life without losing either the benefits of the connection to kinship and friendship networks in the village or a long-term connection with their house and their land. Brick kiln migration, after all, was almost always seen as a temporary phase in a person's life.

### **Putting Data Into Tables**

Mere stories are rarely convincing and thus as far as the stories I have heard can be summarized into tables, here is a quantitative indication of the characteristics of the village migrants.

57% of those who have ever been to brick kilns, say they went the very first time for either one or more of the following reasons - to explore and roam, escape from a problem back at home, or because they wanted to live out a prohibited love relationship. While it was important to have the financial capacity which working and living at brick kilns provided to live out all these wishes, economic reasons were not the most

important ones. Brick kiln migration for these first time migrants provided an opportunity to do certain things and be certain people away from home.

However, as I have shown in the case of the migrants from Tapu at the Daisy Brick Factory in 2001-2002, there were multiple reasons as to why people migrated in any one year. While it is always difficult to entirely classify a person's motivation for migrating into one category of reasons, I have summarised patterns of reasons for people's migration to the brick kilns from Tapu in 2000-2001 in Figure 7.

56 migrants, that is just above 70% of the total migrants that year, migrated despite having a stable economic basis back in the village. That is, that if they stayed back in Tapu, they had households which could support them through all the twelve months of the year.

More than half of these economically stable migrants (accounting for nearly 40% of the total migrants) went for the fun and adventure of amorous relationships, life away from parents and visiting new places. All 56 of them were unmarried youths and 10% of them were going for the very first time. This point struck me one day when Onga, the Tapu *paenbharra*, came to ask me – 'Please come and help me make your brother (his son) Manju understand that I need him at home and that he mustn't go to the kilns.' Despite the fact that Onga had more fields than he could look after (as a result he had given his spiritual fields to someone else to cultivate), his only son Manju had been going to the kilns for the last three years. According to Onga, this was for the simple reason that at the kilns Manju had the freedom to eat meat and fish and have alcohol every day. Although Onga knew this was not actually true he was expressing his broader exasperation that the only reason why Manju went to the brick kilns was that life there was more fun.

About 20% of the economically stable migrants, that is 16% of the total migrants, were newly married couples who wanted to set up independent households from the boy's parents. They were not going just for 'fun'. They all came from situations where they

did not get on with the boy's parents and where the land had not yet been divided so the young couples had not got their share. They had a choice to do as their parents desired and remain in a joint family with their yearly subsistence needs met from the parental home. But while the parents wanted their children and their wives to stay in the parental home and help in the fields, the young couples were able to rebel by leaving for the kilns from where they hoped to be both socially free from their parents and earn enough money to come back and set up their own house.

Three of the Tapu migrants in 2000-2001 had had a fight with their kin and had left abruptly that year as a means of protest and to get away from temporarily problematic relationships. In the case of one woman who had left after a fight with her husband, the husband followed her to the kilns to bring her back.

Just over 10% of the 2000-2001 migrants went also to get away from kin but for a different reason. They wanted to ensure that they saved a certain amount of cash that year, usually to pay off a loan, as in the case of Fatra Munda who needed to redeem his land before the rains, or buy some cattle. Although the migrants felt that they could earn this money back in the village, they believed that saving it could only be done in the kilns. In the village they always felt under social pressure from kin and friends to spend money earned on drink and gifts and celebration. Thus they preferred to earn and save in the kilns, away from kith and kin.

In contrast to these 56 migrants I calculated that 23 migrants, just less than 30% of the total, had situations back in the village where they would find it very difficult to make ends meet if they didn't migrate. They now perceived migration, not as a choice, but as an economic necessity. Of these, four were women whose husbands had left them and were looked down on by others in the village because of their marital situation. They had no land and had not developed survival strategies to cope with life in the village throughout the year. Three were old single men who had gone one step further than Burababa and could not live with their siblings or their sons and daughters and who had no desire to productively cultivate their share of land especially because they could not

rely on help from their kin to do so. Sixteen were individuals who had either had inter-tribe marriages or were accused of witchcraft in the village. They felt more comfortable in the kilns and had therefore not made their land productive nor developed alternative livelihood strategies to stay in the village all year round. But in the case of all these 23 migrants, all admitted that if they really wanted to, they could develop strategies to survive in the village for all twelve months.

If we see the figures of migration tables as not just mere numbers but as having complex stories of their own, there is a point to be made that, from the migrant's point of view, brick kiln migration also provides a space of economic, social and cultural autonomy from the village.

### **Threatening Jharkhand State**

Towards the end of November 2001, I read in the Ranchi daily newspaper, the *Prabhat Khabar*, the views of a Jharkhandi activist vehemently arguing for an anti-migration bill to be passed in Jharkhand,

‘... Why should tribal girls ... be suppressed by the brick-kiln owners, contractors and middlemen? Why should they be forced to work as bonded labourers and low-waged workers? These questions are related to protection of the reputation of the glorious history of this land and are related to the issue of living freely in a democracy with equality of rights, for the protection of human rights and the right to freedom ...’  
(28 November 2001).

On the same day that this article was published, I had spent several hours chatting to Sonamani, a woman from a village about 40 kilometres from Tapu, who had taken up labour contracting with her brother after her marriage had failed and she had been gang raped in her marital village. For the last thirteen years she had been spending half the year at the kilns and the rest back in her natal village. In 2000, however, a brewing

problem finally culminated in somebody stealing the cement and bricks for her father's new house. Sonamani suspected that this was an act of revenge by a contractor whose brick kiln migrants now preferred her as their migration contractor. She feared that the man had the backing of the Naxalite party, the Maoist Communist Centre, that he was reputed to have joined. As a result of the threat of the man and his party, when I met her, Sonamani was residing at her sisters' houses in other villages and was desperate to return to the kilns. When I told her of all the atrocious stories I had heard of things that happen to women at the kilns, she insisted that I had got it all wrong and that in her 14 years experience she had never come across such a case. She said that people in the foreign world were kind, it was people at home that were bad.

I was again stunned by the stark contrast in the two viewpoints coincidentally being revealed to me on the same day. On the one hand, I agree that migrant labour at the brick kilns can be viewed as part of an exploitative system. Indeed many migrants expect to be cheated in the kilns in the same way that the ex-landlords and the contractors cheat them at home. On the other hand, however, I have no doubt that for most of those who do go to the brick kilns from Tapu, their migration was not only seen as a movement out of choice but, moreover, that the brick kilns represented an important temporary space away from certain social constraints of life at home. Hence the common expression, life at the kilns is 'free' – migrant labour conditions are interpreted by the migrants more often as a space of freedom rather than oppression. As Willis proposed with regard to working class children in England, 'there really is at some level a rational and potentially developmental basis for outcomes which appear to be completely irrational and regressive' (1978: 120). It is not contradictory to view brick kiln labour migration as part of a broader system of exploitation and at the same time understand that to most of those that do migrate, the opportunity and option of going away to brick kilns provides a space of autonomy from the social and cultural constraints back at home.

I wondered whether those who railed against brick kiln migration just did not know of its non-economic significances for the majority of the migrants? At the village level, it became obvious fairly quickly that this was not the case. The higher caste Yadav

descendants did not go to the kilns despite the fact that they engaged in hard manual labour in the village and were now often less well-off than some of the families whose members went to the kilns. They saw brick kiln migration as representing an impure life of low social control in food, drink and sex that was demeaning for higher caste people but only 'natural' for tribals and untouchables.

People like Somra Munda, with whom I began the chapter, were on the other hand keen to get away from this representation of tribal people. One of the main ways in which they did this was by emulating certain higher caste values – for instance, in attitudes to food, drink and sexual relations. It is for this reason that they looked down on brick kiln migration. Most of the older generation of tribal peasants in Tapu had more blurred views on brick kiln migration. Whilst, on the one hand they sometimes showed respect to Somra for his views, on the other they were also quietly appreciative that as tribal people or those of lower castes, their principles of living were just different from those of higher castes.

The most vehement protestors against brick kiln migration were, however, middle-class tribal activists in Ranchi city like the one writing for the Prabhat Khabar. Such activists, as shown in the next chapter, often form the advisory panel for organisations like the Maoist Communist Centre (the MCC) who want to expand in Jharkhand and are looking for social causes to appropriate in order to get mass support. I suspect that these opponents of brick kiln migration know exactly what this movement represents to those that migrate and their reasons for propagandising against it are actually not that far off, though somewhat different, from Somra's.

People choosing to leave the rich and glorious traditions of tribal life in village Jharkhand threaten this representation of the new State by their very movement. In fact, in an evaluation of the Jharkhand Movement in 2000, Professor Ram Dayal Munda, then at the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages at Ranchi University and also a member of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, argues that if the current trend in out migration continues, 'the real Jharkhandis will be all gone from the region



before it is too long. Therefore, a new development policy is needed, such that it should discourage displacement.’ (Munda, 2000b: 22). What in effect is at issue here is Spencer’s insightful analysis of political modernity in which a central image of the nation state is that it consists of people ‘living in the same place’ (2003: 44) and obsession to control migration is a broader symptom of maintaining this illusion. With the formation of Jharkhand and the ‘alien’ BJP government coming to power in the new state, Jharkhandi activists feel the need more than ever to reclaim Jharkhand as a tribal state. In doing so, they are also recreating the image of Jharkhand as a tribal state. As Spencer further argues, the way in which movement apparently violates the official order, also, as it were, creates the opportunity for a better and clearer display of that order (2003: 45).

There is, however, more to be said about the campaign against brick kiln migration and the creation of a Jharkhand State. What is also at issue is the desire of the Jharkhandi political elite to move away from the old high case representations of morally impure, drunken and sexually promiscuous tribals to the image of a purer *adivasi*, the aboriginal citizen not only of Jharkhand but also of the Indian state. In this new image, the tribal elite is not aiming to *sanskritise* tribals - to change their customs, rites, beliefs and way of life to emulate high or dominant castes (cf. Srinivas, 1966: 6). Rather, they are rejecting the caste system and raising their status based on the idea that they are the ‘original Indians’, the *adivasis*.

In this process they are recreating Jharkhandi ‘authentic *adivasi* tradition’ albeit in a new or modern way. Institutions like the *dhumkuria* are thus being revived as learning institutions rather than as dormitories that gave space to premarital sexual relations. The *akhra* is being depicted as a village meeting place emphasising the communitarian nature of *adivasi* villages rather than a village dancing circle where girls and boys would dance together to highly sexually charged songs and movements. Such recreation of authentic tribal communities has also been influential in the Tapu area, as I have shown in Chapter 4. A campaign to strengthen the *parha* was begun by Karamchand Bhagat and intensified by Vishwanath Bhagat and the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* (JMM). A

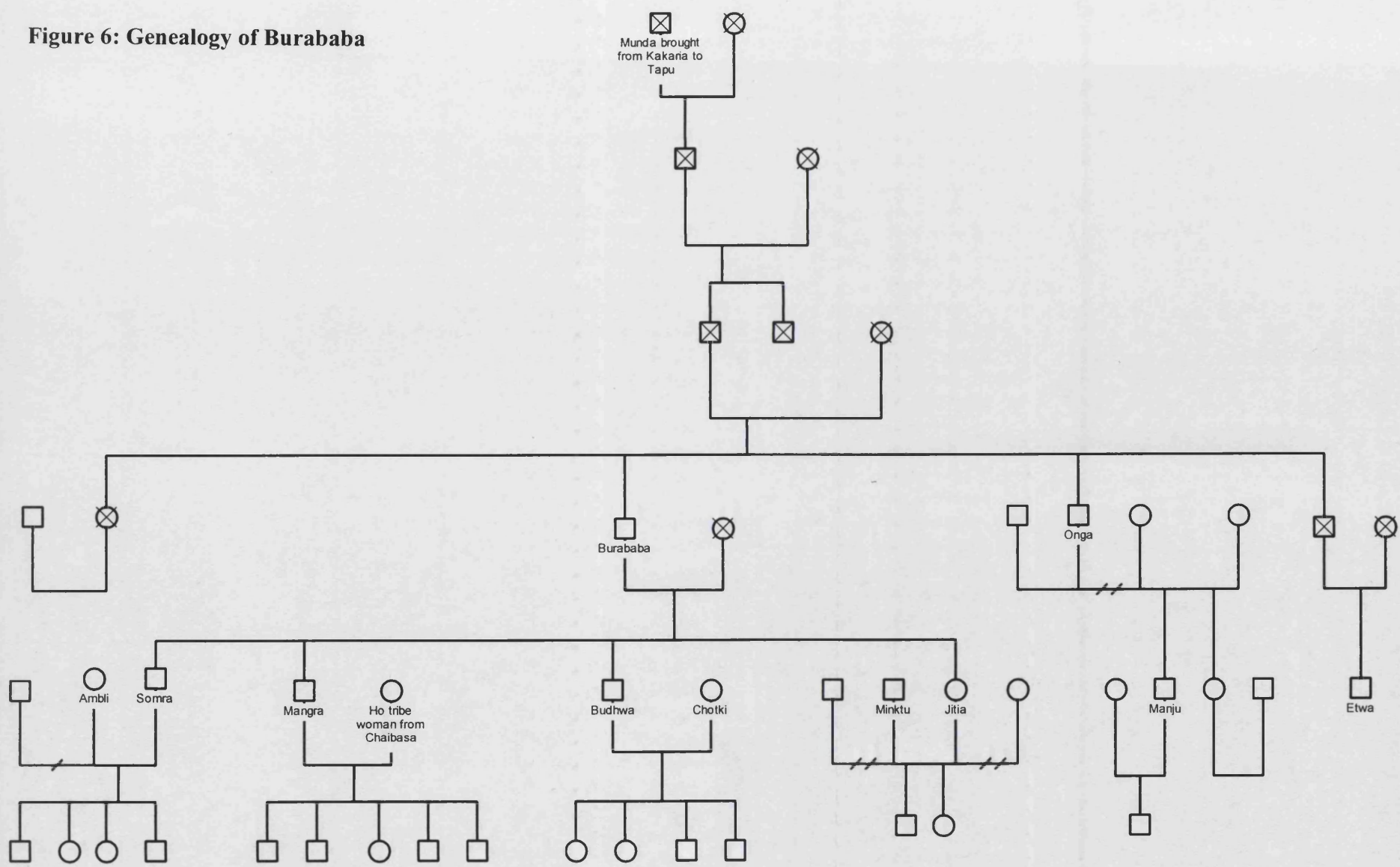
central part of this campaign was ensuring the *parha* convened in order to 'solve' disputes. Of the 29 cases that I was able to record, the most common form of dispute solved at these meetings were postmarital love affairs or elopements, locally called '*dhuku-dhara*'. One of the most famous of the *dhuku-dhara* cases was that of Kali Munda's daughter and Sukra Oraon's son from Nagdi who were together caught by the girl's mother engaged in some passionate affair. As a result, Kali began to arrange his daughter's wedding to a suitable boy. The girl, however, ran away with her boyfriend to the brick kilns. A JMM member in the same village decided to get the *parha* involved and went with a JMM contingent, who said they represented the *parha*, to the brick kiln to bring the couple back and put an end to the affair. In this case, the JMM/*parha* members were unsuccessful as the couple resolutely refused. The girl was pregnant and when they finally returned, they were married off to each other.

As this example shows, stories from the Tapu area seem to suggest that brick kiln migration also represents the valued 'freedom' symbolic of the *akhra*, the village dancing circle, or the older *dhumkhuria*, the village dormitory for the youth. My suggestion is that the brick kilns are too dangerous a space for the reproduction of the type of image of the *adivasi* citizen of Jharkhand that the state's tribal elites want to produce and they know this full well. Towards the end of my stay I came to know of a survey by a Ranchi University Professor in four districts of Jharkhand investigating the reasons why people migrate to the kilns. Its results indicated that the majority of those who left went in order to escape from a fight at home, to explore a new country, or to live out a relationship of love. At striking odds with the arguments of his colleagues and friends who were vehemently protesting against brick kiln migration, the Professor felt obliged to hide the results and leave the research topic aside. As such, Jharkhandi activists are able to depict migration to the brick kilns as simply furthering *adivasi* exploitation and as therefore a movement to be stopped. This is in contrast to the fact that for many of the migrants, brick kiln migration is about rejecting Jharkhandi tribal elite notions of an authentic *adivasi* and the brick kilns are seen as a place where people are 'free'.

Figure 6: Genealogy of Burababa

Munda brought from Kakania to Tapu

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**Figure 7: Table to show the reasons for migrating for the 2000-2001 Tapu migrants.**

Migrants with a stable economic basis in the village = 56 migrants = 71% of total migrants				Migrants who would have economic difficulty if based in the village for 12 months = 23 migrants = 29% of total migrants			
Reasons for migrating				Reasons for migrating			
For fun, adventure, amorous relationships, to buy clothes	Newly married couple wanting to set up a new household	Escaping after a problem with kin	For a one-off saving	Social exclusion (eg witchcraft accusation)	Inter-tribe marriage	Old, single man, not wanting to live with kin	Young, separated single women
31 migrants = 39% of all migrants	13 migrants = 16% of all migrants	3 migrants = 4% of all migrants	9 migrants = 11% of all migrants	10 migrants = 13% of all migrants	6 migrants = 8% of all migrants	3 migrants = 4% of all migrants	5 migrants = 6% of all migrants



Plate 12: Dancing in the Tapu village *akhra* at the *Karma* festival. Photograph by author.



Plate 13: Women in Tapu in the *ropa*, rice transplanting, season. Photograph by author.





Plate 14: The Daisy Brick Factory in West Bengal with the labour camp in the background and the owner's mansion to the left. Photograph by author.

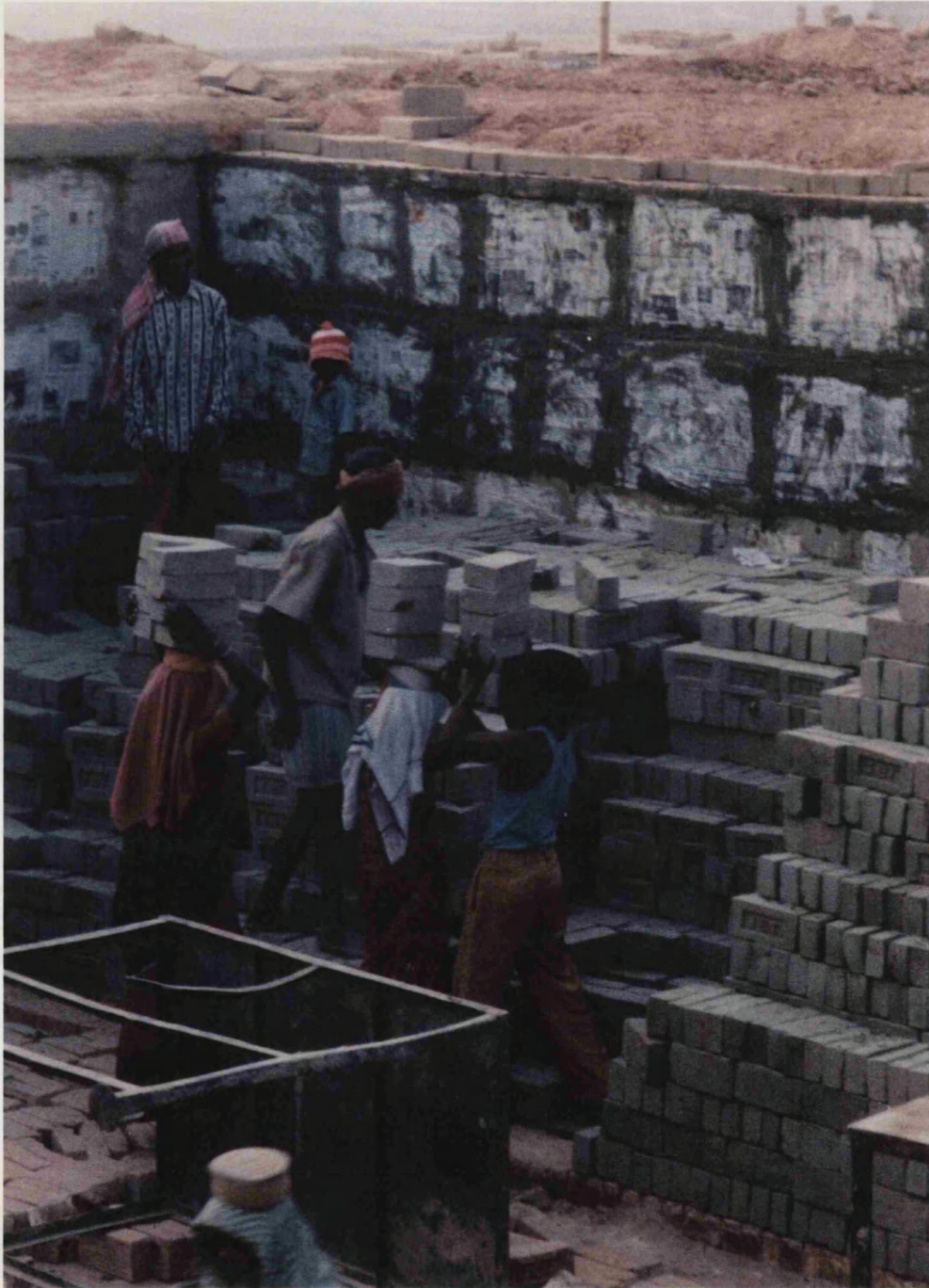


Plate 15. Men receiving bricks from women inside the brick kiln. Daisy Brick Factory, West Bengal. Photograph by author.





Plate 16: Women carrying uncooked bricks. Daisy Brick Factory, West Bengal. Photograph by author.



Plate 17. Shila choosing a necklace in Bandel on Sunday, holiday from working in the brick kilns. Photograph by author.



## Chapter 6: Alternative States?: The Maoist Communist Centre

Every morning I would wait to hear the rattling of a bicycle being parked against my house and the tinkling of milk jars as they were unloaded off the handle-bars. Shiv Gope would pop his head around the wooden door and tease, ‘ I haven’t got all the time in the world. Why isn’t your pot ready?’ He would give me half a pint of his buffalo milk before proceeding to sell the rest to three Bero roadside restaurants, locally called *line-hotels*. On his return at noon, he brought me a copy of the Ranchi daily newspaper, the *Prabhat Khabar*. In the process of receiving milk and discussing the news headlines, I came to know Shiv well enough for him to ask me, one day in June 2001, if I would look at something in the possession of Khand Oraon, the manager of a *line-hotel* for truckers just outside Bero. Judging from the way Shiv spoke to me, I knew it was definitely something that was related to what he would have called, ‘*do number kam*’ (literally second number work but indicating illegal dealings).

Strikingly tall, slim, smiley and eager to discuss life in England, I had met Khand on several occasions when I stopped at his *line-hotel* with Shiv for a cup of tea, en route to Bero. I recalled that he was not from the Bero area but was born in Bijupara, Mandar, about twenty kilometres north of Bero. After gaining a BA in History and Political Science from the Marwari College in Ranchi, he proceeded further South to Chaibasa where his elder brother’s friend arranged his admission and accommodation for an MA in History. In 1987 he came to Bero to join his brother, a Vice-Principal of Karamchand Bhagat College and also a great friend of the ex-Congress MLA after whom the college was named.

Bero was particularly attractive to Khand. Some years before he had stayed with a Brahmin undergraduate friend in the nearby village of Baridih, and had fallen in love with his friend’s cousin, Anita Roy. In 1994 the couple had a secret civil marriage, as the union of a Brahmin *zamindar* descendant woman and a tribal man would have been scandalous. The following year, when her family tried to arrange her marriage to a

suitable boy from Lohardaga, Anita's civil marriage to Khand was revealed. Khand insisted on having a public Hindu wedding at the Bero temple. Anita's family, although resolutely refusing to attend, appeared on the final day. When I met Khand, the couple had a three-year old son but, while Khand resided in his *line-hotel*, Anita and their son lived with her mother in Baridih. Khand was of the opinion that it was not safe for Anita to live at the *line-hotel* as it was frequented day and night by men of 'all sorts'.

In the early 1990s, Khand had become the Bero president of the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU), a more militant wing of the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* (JMM), which had been set up in Ranchi in 1987 with the purpose of achieving the independence of Jharkhand State. It was during this time that Khand came to know Shiv. In the mid 1990s, Shiv was frustrated that, despite his college education, there seemed little prospect of achieving a better life than that offered by the remote mud huts and fields of tribal dominated Tapu. For several years Shiv had been delivering a third of his milk to Akshay Roy's *line-hotel* in Bero. Akshay was Anita's cousin and was known in the Bero area as the 'right-hand man' of Vishwanath Bhagat, a dynamic young Oraon, the then Bero Block JMM president, and reputed to be the strongest candidate for the 1995 MLA elections. Through Akshay, Shiv became involved as a worker in Vishwanath Bhagat's JMM election campaign. Like many of the workers, Shiv was attracted by the promise that, if Vishwanath was elected his workers would receive contracts to implement Block Development Office schemes through which they could make illicit profits (Chapter 3). While this was an enticing promise, most workers were aware that if Vishwanath did indeed win, there would be competition between workers to secure the limited number of schemes. However, as a result of his strong preexisting relationship with Akshay, Shiv felt that despite strong competition from the *ex-zamindar* elite of Tapu, he would be able to secure a development contract if Vishwanath was elected.

In 1996, following Vishwanath's election success, Shiv did indeed received Tapu's first Block Development contract to build the Bhasnanda-Tapu road, the first dirt track road to the village. To acquire the contract Shiv had received support not only from Akshay,

but also from a couple of Akshays' friends, one of whom was Khand - a friendship developed in the aftermath of Khand's marriage to Anita.

In the following months Akshay and Khand assured Shiv that they would be there to protect him from the growing jealousy of the *zamindar* descendant faction. The latter were outraged that Shiv, whose ancestors had after all been brought by them to Tapu to look after their livestock, had received the contract. They saw it as their right as *zamindars* to implement the scheme and, indeed, have since received all the Block Development Office contracts for Tapu. One night, soon after Shiv had begun the construction, a group of men from the *zamindar* lineages woke Shiv by throwing a clay pot full of their urine and faeces at his door. They were armed with axes, knives and sticks, and shouted that they were ready to beat Shiv to death. Shiv scared them away by indicating that he had a gun, a weapon he had acquired from Khand. As a result of such incidents around the building of the road, Shiv's respect for Akshay and Khand grew. And likewise, the two older men formed a greater attachment to Shiv. Indeed, in 2000, Khand's trust of Shiv solidified when he returned an envelope containing Rs10000 that had dropped out the pocket of Khand's elder brother.

Wanting to know more about Khand's political activities, and feeling somewhat relaxed by his friendly manner with me, I told Shiv I'd be happy to look at Khand's secret object. One day soon after, Khand led me past various dark curtains at the back of his *line-hotel* to his small single bedroom. He revealed a plastic wrapped envelope. In it was a one million US dollar note with a certificate of authenticity printed by the 'American Bank Note Company' in 1988 for an 'International Association of Millionaires' and valid up to 2005. Khand wanted to know if it was genuine. Feeling out of my depth, I replied that I could try to find out if such notes had ever been printed and, perhaps a little innocently, added that his best bet was to take it to a bank in Ranchi to find out. At a later stage, on my return to England, a friend conducted a 'Google.com search' and revealed that the bill was a marketing idea of a Tari Steward who developed it in 1987 as a collectible that could be bought for \$18.50 a bill.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.i-a-m.ws/bill.cfm>.

Shiv told me later that they had had various discussions about whether they could trust me and reveal the note. And Khand had suggested that, if I could make it into rupees, there would definitely be a cut in it for me. I never, however, came to find out how the note came into the possession of Khand but gathered that it had been passing between a few men, who I had met at Khand's hotel on previous occasions, who were all trying to figure out its validity. The men were from neighbouring Blocks, and were all involved in the Maoist Communist Centre, the MCC.

The MCC, renamed as such in 1975, is a branch of the Naxalite movement that erupted violently in 1967 in Naxalbari, Darjeeling District, West Bengal. The Naxalite movement caught the imagination of many people, internationally, as an armed peasant and worker uprising against landlords and capitalists which was inspired by the political philosophy of Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse-tung.<sup>85</sup> Leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal mobilized a largely Santhali tribal peasantry against landlords and forcibly occupied land, burnt records that they said had been used to cheat them and cancelled old debts.<sup>86</sup> The uprising was suppressed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), which had been voted into power in the state assembly elections of West Bengal for the first time in 1967 as part of a United Front government. However, many of the more radical members of the CPI(M) had either led, or were attracted to, the central thrust of the Naxalite movement – which had called for the seizure of power through armed struggle. In response, feeling disappointed and betrayed by the CPI(M), they formed the more 'revolutionary' Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)). The CPI(ML) argued that feudalism and comprador-bureaucrat capitalism were the two main props of imperialism in India, and that these systems of exploitation could only be abolished through armed agrarian revolution led by a secret and underground party that rejected the parliamentary path to reform.

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<sup>85</sup> The early Naxalites acknowledged their inspiration from the Chinese revolution and the first Naxalite party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) had Chinese approval.

<sup>86</sup> For brief histories see Banerjee (1980) and Singh (1995).

After 1972, when Charu Mazumdar died in police custody, there was severe state repression of the Naxalite movement, and many leading members of the CPI(ML) were either killed or imprisoned. From then on, various party splits occurred on ideological, organizational and geographical lines. The new groups included (the) CPI(ML)Liberation, CPI(ML)Central Organizing Committee, CPI(ML)Unity and CPI(ML)Party Unity, all of which had varying perspectives on the need for armed struggle, the role of mass organization, and the potential for reform through electoral politics.<sup>87</sup> The MCC formed in response to criticism of the CPI(ML) that it had neglected the task building a People's Army for guerilla warfare. In later years the MCC gained growing support as it opposed other revolutionary groups, like Liberation, who had begun to contest in State Assembly elections under the banner of an open front organization (in the case of Liberation, the Indian People's Front).

In 1987, the MCC became famous as the most violent branch of the Naxalites when, in the Aurangabad and Gaya Districts of Bihar, 42 Rajputs were brutally slaughtered in two villages by Yadav followers of the MCC.<sup>88</sup> The women had been beheaded with axes, and the men had been either shot or had had their throats slit. The Bihar government's response to its 'flaming fields'<sup>89</sup> included the banning of the ultras or the extremists, as they came to be commonly called, under Section 16 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1908.<sup>90</sup> Fourteen years later, in the aftermath of the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO), introduced in December 2001, and later made into an Act of Parliament (POTA), the Vajpayee Central Indian government also officially banned the MCC.

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<sup>87</sup> For good summaries on the emergence of different branches of the Naxalite Movement in Bihar, see Bhatia (2000: 46-63); and for the emergence in Andhra Pradesh, see Sinha (1989).

<sup>88</sup> The Aurangabad incidents have also been depicted as a sign of the degeneration of the MCC from a fight for social and economic justice to a caste conflict with only a veneer of a class struggle (cf. Pathak; 1993)

<sup>89</sup> 'Bihar in Flames' the title of a recent book by S K Ghosh (2000), the imagery of 'Bihar is burning' goes back to a CPI(ML) 1986 document which referred to the flaming fields of Bihar.

<sup>90</sup> Andhra Pradesh banned its main Naxalite branch, the People's War Group (PWG), in 1992.

Despite government suppression, the MCC worked as an underground movement, and captured increasing territory in the 1990s, in the South Bihar districts that are now part of Jharkhand State. By 2000, ten of the 22 districts of Jharkhand were declared by the government as 'Naxalite infested'.<sup>91</sup> The media also declared 'extremism' as the greatest challenge to the Babulal Marandi Government. By the first anniversary celebrations of the independence of Jharkhand, newspapers were publishing the violent acts of the MCC (Figure 8) and the police had formally launched an 'Operation Against Extremism' (Figure 9). And, by the time I began fieldwork, the areas to the immediate West, South West and North West of Bero Block (Lapung Block, Mandar Block and Gumla District) were said to be strongholds of the MCC. Approaching from the West and the North, the Bero area was seen as one of the next targets.

Reflecting on the issues of researching what many have called a 'terrorist organisation', I am reminded, by the million dollar bill note, that I did not in fact set out to study the MCC. Through my preexisting relationship with Shiv, Khand, Bhavesh Chatterjee and Vinod Betha who became, or had friends who were, targets of MCC expansion, information on the movement began falling into my lap, and slowly I became interested in exploring specific questions and emerging patterns. Of these informants, I privilege the accounts of Shiv and Bhavesh, my longest, closest and most trusted friends. Vinod, the only one of the four who was not a target of the MCC, but who was a close friend of Nasrudin, a man who had joined the MCC and who got arrested before I could meet him, does not feature in this paper. Although I do not tell Nasrudin's story as it was the weakest and most patchy part of my data, I use the more general insights of MCC operation that it generated to inform my argument.

That I did not set out with a more targeted agenda of research on the MCC is both the strength and weakness of my perspective on the MCC's operations in the area. As the story of how I came to know about the note suggests, secrecy and caution with what information is revealed, and to whom, is a central concern of those who have links with

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<sup>91</sup> These were the districts of Palamau, Giridih, Garwa, Chatra, Latehar, Ranchi, Gumla, Hazaribagh, Lohardaga and Bokaro.

the underground movement. Thus, unless one enters as a member of the MCC, or as a very close and trusted friend of the Naxalites (as Bhatia (2000) did in Central Bihar<sup>92</sup>), or as a state official who has access to state information about the operation of the movement in a particular area (cf. Singh, 1995), it is very difficult to openly and systematically research the movement.<sup>93</sup> These methods, however, have their own disadvantages. Most notably they are susceptible to privileging the movement's message, and to an exclusive focus on the MCC, so that a more holistic approach that situates the organization in the context of wider social and political processes is neglected. As such, whilst a potential weakness of my account is that it stems from only four main informants, I feel that my long enduring relationship with the men, one that preexisted my knowledge of their involvement with the MCC, are in fact the strengths of my analysis. This chapter is an attempt to give voice to their perspectives of the MCC, and to shed a light on the emerging emerging patterns and practices about which they speak.

### **Conventional Understandings of the Naxalites**

Many academics, journalists and activists recognize that in the recent resurgences of the Naxalite movement, it is unusual for the people involved at the local level to understand their mobilization in terms of a Marxist-Leninist ideology of armed struggle by peasants and labourers against landlords and capitalists. Rather, as Bhatia suggests, the Naxalites are most often seen in conventional accounts as a 'people's movement', of the poor and the exploited, that holds the aim of achieving social justice and equality (Bhatia, 1988: 30). In Central Bihar, Bhatia suggests that struggle on the ground is focused on a range of issues including land redistribution and better terms for sharecroppers, minimum wages, access to common property resources, basic social rights and respect for lower

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<sup>92</sup> Bhatia's (2000) study focuses on the CPI(ML) and the Party Unity (PU) but her data on the MCC is not as strong.

<sup>93</sup> Other people have attempted to do the same in other parts of the world (cf Feldman (1991) on Northern Ireland).

castes, and the effective policing of criminal gangs (Bhatia, 2000). As a whole, the movement is certainly understood by these accounts as a '*garibo ki party*' or the 'party of the poor' and one that ensures that, 'for the first time, on a sustained basis, after 1947, the poor can turn to their [Naxalite comrades] in the time of injustice and know that there is somebody who will stand up for them against oppressive and exploitative forces, whether it be upper castes-classes or the state' (Bhatia, 2000: 79).

In Jharkhand, it has been argued that the state's failure to pay attention to its tribal communities has encouraged a 'rising tide of Naxalism' (Corbridge, 2002: 56). Corbridge's argument is that the formation of Jharkhand State was more a result of 'political bargains between a restricted number of elite actors than [the consequence of] pressures from below' (2002: 56) and that, as such, it is no coincidence that a more reasonable choice for poor tribal people is their increasing opposition to the state by turning to the Naxalites (2002: 56, 69). This perspective leads Corbridge and Harriss to argue that, 'In this Hobbesian world the empowerment of the poor and the poorest is often in defiance of the state and its officers,' (2001: 206). Moreover, they attribute the MCC's success to its ability to contest 'the power of established politician-contractor groupings' (Corbridge and Harriss, 2001: 206), the first target of the MCC (Frontline, May 24 2002: 39).

These perspectives are also articulated locally in Jharkhand. As a chat with any newspaper reading Ranchi-ite will reveal, it is commonly perceived in Jharkhand that the MCC's days of armed revolution by the peasants and the workers against landlords and capitalists are over, and that the dominant target is now the state.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, in the year between January 2001 and February 2002, all the major strikes in Jharkhand by the MCC were against the police. Police reports claim that 74 police lives were lost including the killing of a dozen Border Security Force men in Hazaribagh, the murder of

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<sup>94</sup> Although on 31 August 2001, the People's War (PW) and MCC united in Jharkhand, in this chapter I focus on the activities of the MCC as this was the group operating in the Tapu area. People's War was formed in Bihar in 1999 after the People's War Group (PWG) merged with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Party Unity (PU).



a Deputy Superintendent of Police and four others in Palamau, the killing of thirteen police at a Picket in Topchanchi, and the death of eleven police blown up by an MCC landmine blast in Lohardaga.<sup>95</sup> The MCC, itself, also declares that their protest is against 'bourgeois state oppression' and that they are equipped with arms to cripple state administration in Jharkhand. The overall goal, it argues, is to form a parallel administration in what is known as a 'Liberated zone'. In this region the MCC would disable interference from the state and, for example, collects taxes, hands out business licenses and settles all disputes. In these regions, the MCC would 'liberate the poor'.

Given, therefore, the received wisdom that especially in Jharkhand, the MCC's main target is the state and politician-contractor groupings, and its main supporters are poor tribal peasants, I was struck by the fact that my informants' stories seemed to suggest almost the opposite. They suggest that the MCC's spread in the Tapu area was in fact dependent, not on a poor peasantry, but on pre-existing politician-contractor groupings. Indeed, not only did the MCC appear to operate through a political elite intimately connected with the state, but also, on occasions, it was used by, and worked in collaboration with, state officials. These facts seemed to suggest that at the local level, the boundaries between the MCC and the state were very blurred and that the two 'organizations' were not necessarily, as commonly perceived, forces in opposition.

I want to argue that, in the sense that the MCC is anti-state, it should be understood to be against the present modern state as opposed to being against the idea of the state per se. In fact, in many ways, the MCC appears like a state – highly organized, coercive and violent, and supposedly developmental. As such, I also explore in this chapter what the MCC's vision of an alternative state might entail. Indeed, with similarities to the visions of the Jharkhandi activists of a better state for tribals (Chapter 5), I suggest that the MCC's alternative vision includes the reform of the 'loose' tribal self, and related frivolous sexual and drinking practices, into a 'better', more tightly controlled, disciplined and moral body. I suggest that such social reform does not threaten local

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<sup>95</sup> Cf *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, p2. 1 November 2001; *Frontline*, May 24, 2002, p 39.

political elites but rather that it alienates the poorer sections of the society, that the MCC allegedly wishes to serve.

### **Politicians, Contractors and the MCC**

To begin, I want to consider the MCC's plan of expansion in the Tapu area. By the time I arrived in 2000, the MCC had made substantial headway in the villages to the west of Tapu. In the hamlets on the border of Lapung Block, regular meetings were taking place in which the MCC had apparently solved village disputes, and some young men had even been sent to join the underground military cadres. The organization wanted to expand further east. It did not take much imagination to see that geographically Tapu was an attractive village for an MCC base. In the event of attack from the police, the forest around the village, greater and denser than that of most surrounding villages, would not only be attractive to wild elephants! The jungle led into the slopes of Khasi-Toli hill, a potential lookout point for the surrounding area, and the small river at the edge of Tapu could provide a rapid escape route by a small boat. In the year that I lived in Tapu, Shiv had become entangled in the MCC plan for expansion into Tapu.

In the midst of the merriment of the second wedding of Shiv's cousin Laxmi Gope to a Gope woman from Baridih in February 2001, Khand arrived at Shiv's house with three unknown young men and several bottles of rum. After several glasses of drink, away from the excitement of the wedding, in Shiv's bedroom in the furthest hamlet of Tapu, the men revealed their identity.

Their cause, they explained to Shiv, was noble. Despite more than fifty years of Indian independence, despite the separation of Jharkhand from Bihar, there was still no real freedom for the poor and exploited people of Jharkhand. The government was corrupt, political parties did not have relevant ideologies and were only interested in buying votes. There was neither justice nor equality. The poor were only becoming more and

more exploited. The only solution, they said, was a revolution. Gandhi, with his non-violence policies, ruined the nation. Now there was a need for total violence to overturn the situation. The problem, they explained, was the mobilisation of poor people to participate in this revolution. The people of this area, they said, were unaware of their situation. They neither knew their rights nor how to achieve them. And, they did not know the nature and extent of their exploitation. As such, the exploited people needed to be enlightened and, as the only organisation able to do this, the MCC needed to begin at the grassroots in villages like Tapu. In this regard they said, they needed the support of Shiv to build a base in Tapu, slowly introduce the MCC to the people and eventually hold meetings and solve disputes in Tapu.

In return for his cooperation, the three men promised to ensure that in all areas that came under MCC control people who helped them and became 'their men' profited from all '*do number kam*', and in particular from contracts from Block Development Office schemes. In areas under MCC control, the contractors for Block Development Office projects were all men involved in MCC expansion. They were thus able to make the usual illicit profit of pocketing about 10% of the cost by taking short cuts in the implementation of development schemes. In addition, it was expected that in these areas, the Block Officials - fearing the MCC - would take smaller percentages, thus leaving larger sums for the MCC to siphon off.

Shiv, extremely sharp and shrewd, neither agreed nor disagreed to help. He showed appreciation for their cause, said that he would do what he could but added that it was difficult to get fully involved as household responsibilities and three children kept him a busy man. He was not, he pointed out, any longer a single, unattached man. He asked them to give him eight days notice if they wished to return to Tapu as otherwise it was possible they would make the long journey to find him elsewhere.

After the life-threatening experiences of building the 1996 Bhasnanda-Tapu road, Shiv had decided not to engage in '*do number*' activities and to stick to earning the clean and hard earned '*ek number*' income from his cattle and his fields. However, he realized that

as Khand had already introduced him to the MCC, he was in a vulnerable position and it would not be an easy task to evade them. Rather than avoid the MCC entirely and thus have no knowledge of their structure and operation, putting him in an even more susceptible position when they inevitably pressurized him to participate more actively, Shiv decided that it would be wise to maintain a marginal position as a close but silent observer. With this approach he hoped to acquire enough information about their activities to know when to avoid them. Thus in the following weeks Shiv, although trying not to appear to be doing so, kept his eyes and ears open.

At selective times Shiv continued to visit Khand's line-hotel, which became one of the confirmed meeting places of MCC men coming from outside the Bero area. Two of the three men that had come to Tapu with Khand became identified as Chandra Ganjhu and Anil Ganjhu. Like that of the Odhars of Tapu, Ganjhu was a surname given by the Maharajah to families who became *zamindars*. In the MCC hierarchy of zones, sub-zones, areas and villages, Chandra was identified as a Sub-Zonal Commander and Anil as an Area Commander. The last zone of control of Chandra and Anil, who now appeared to be leading the expansion into the Bero and Tapu area, was Khand's home town in the Bijupara area in Mandar Block to the north of Bero. In fact, Khand had come to know them through his other brother who was still based at their birthplace. Men like Khand, who knew the local area well and who had good networks of educated, unemployed youth in the region, became informers and introducers of MCC men from outside the region. They gave the MCC detailed information on the physical and social terrain of the area and introduced them to strategically selected young men, like Shiv, who they thought would enable the MCC to enter into the area. As Shiv put it, they were like the 'CID' of the area.

At first, young men like Shiv were required to help the MCC understand the detailed geography, history and social structure of the specific village to be captured. They were then to aid entry into the village by welcoming the outsiders into their houses where they would eat and sleep as they established a base in the immediate forest. If other outsiders like the police came, the villagers were to disguise the MCC men as 'guests'. The next

stage was for the MCC to rapidly introduce themselves to the village and gain the support of villagers by involving themselves in the resolution of village disputes,<sup>96</sup> and if required, through more violent coercive means. The idea was to capture the village so that the dominant village authority became seen as the MCC, and so that every household was willing to designate at least one male member to assist the MCC whenever it was required. When all the people of the village had come, through whatever means, to be in the fold of the MCC, a few young men would be recruited to MCC bases in other parts of the country. There they would be trained and armed as members of the 'squads' that form their Lal Sena, or underground guerilla army, and then be posted in other areas under MCC control. Men who had enabled the MCC to gain access to the village, could be sent to neighbouring areas as Area Commanders to begin the process of capturing the new area. And so, in this network fashion, the organization planned and implemented expansion.

Thus, people involved with the MCC were involved to different degrees and promised different remuneration. It was rumoured that only the squad members and those above the status of Area Commander joined the party officially and got monthly salaries for their services of between Rs1000 – 5000 a month. Others like Khand, were talked of as 'getting involved' and the degree of their involvement was often described in percentages. Indeed, towards the end of my stay, Khand would talk about himself as being 80% involved, Akshay 70% etc. These members who were 'getting involved', but not 'fully involved', were promised some of the profits of '*do number kam*' as payment.

As the months passed, Shiv was able to keep a close watch on the proceedings. Initially although Khand encouraged him to support the movement, in quieter and more sober moments, he gave Shiv conflicting advice and stressed that it was important to maintain a certain distance and to not trust anyone. However, as the year went on and more men, like Akshay Roy, were wining and dining in the dark with Chandra Ganjhu and him giving their support, Khand began to pressurize Shiv to succumb.

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<sup>96</sup> The MCC call such village meetings, '*Jan Adalats*' or People's Court.

With the increased police crack down on the MCC by the Marandi government<sup>97</sup> in other parts of Jharkhand, an incident happened that confirmed to Shiv that he ought to stay away from the MCC. In August 2001, Shiv and Khand read in the *Prabhat Khabar* that Chandra Ganjhu and six associates were arrested by the police in Mandar.<sup>98</sup> According to the police reports, Chandra confessed his involvement in at least 20 heinous crimes that included eight incidents of mass killings, one of which involved six people, attacks on police pickets, looting of arms and planting of landmines. The reports also stated that Anil had been with Chandra when he was arrested but had managed to escape.<sup>99</sup> While Chandra was identified as a sub-zonal commander, the identity of the six others was not confirmed. The gravity of the incident confirmed to Shiv that, despite the rhetoric of MCC protection for its workers, the most likely casualty of arrests were its grass-roots workers and not its commanders.

For a few months after the incident, things were quiet in Bero and Shiv continued his daily visits to sell milk. However, from around November, Anil returned to the Bero area and the networking and planning at the line-hotel restarted. The pressure on Shiv to

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<sup>97</sup> The thrust of the Marandi crackdown was in August 2001 when the Chief Minister offered 'special benefits' of Rs10000, an *Indira Awas* house, financial assistance of Rs50000, free legal aid, free educational facilities for children till Class eight and security to MCC extremists who were willing to give up armed struggle and surrender. 37 people surrendered but Marandi was careful not to investigate the question whether the surrender was voluntary, stage managed, pressurized or orchestrated (cf. *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, 12 August 2001, p2).

<sup>98</sup> 15 August 2001, *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, p3; 11 August 2001, *Prabhat Khabar*, Ranchi, p4.

<sup>99</sup> Many weeks later I made the connection that the incident had come to have a direct bearing on my own life as the next day two jeeps of armed police, some of whom had come from Ranchi, arrived in Tapu looking for me, to the shock of the villagers. At the time I was in Ranchi and I was told later that they asked about what I was doing, how I lived and had a good look at my house through the small window. They also asked if there was anybody living in the forests. When out of politeness I followed the incident up at the office of the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Ranchi, I was told it was just a 'routine' visit to make sure I was well. Later I realized that the visit was directly a result of Chandra Ganjhu's arrest and figured that after being tortured he must have revealed his regional area of responsibility. Concerned about a foreigner living in an MCC zone of expansion, the police must have come to check up on me.

specify a day for the MCC to come to Tapu increased. He began spending days at his in-laws and sisters' houses in other villages and when in Tapu he feigned illness and asked his father to deliver the milk to Bero instead. Away from Bero, he could avoid Khand and Anil.

However, in early February 2002, they finally caught up with him and insisted that in ten days they would come with eight men to Tapu for a picnic at night on the check dam by the forest. By this time Shiv no longer wished to push for details for fear of generating a conversation that resulted in the date being moved forward. On February 13th 2002, when I was in Ranchi preparing to leave for the brick kilns in West Bengal, Shiv came to tell me he could no longer evade the MCC. He wanted to urgently take up the offer of working on the shop floor in Indore, Madhya Pradesh at the grease-making factory of a patient of my doctor friend. Fortunately the patient was about to depart on the two and a half day journey to Madhya Pradesh the next day and so Shiv returned to Tapu that night to inform his shocked and upset wife, father, mother, grandmother, brother and children that he would return in five months for the rainy season. On 14th February, Shiv left Tapu before dawn, trying to avoid people in the village and in Bero noticing his departure, to begin his first ever journey outside Ranchi District.

When Shiv left for Indore, Khand was keen to take me to the MCC hideout in Mandar. Although it was always portrayed to me as a highly secret place, the fact that I knew about this hideout suggests it was possibly a place where selected non-MCC members were taken in order to publicise the MCC. Nevertheless, several factors made me uncomfortable about going. Firstly, the trip was always conveyed as an opportunity to go fishing and have a picnic and I knew this meant extensive drinking. Secondly, most of the time I felt like I was an object of curiosity, a 'Western Woman', to the men who hung around his line-hotel and I knew that I would have been the only woman. Thirdly, I felt that although it would have been interesting to see how the men interact with each other, I was not sure that I would learn anything particularly insightful about the MCC other than what they wished to feed to journalists and the outside media. In fact, I had known from Shiv that the men had been considering taking me to the hideout for several

weeks as they thought that it would be fun for them but, moreover, that it would be approved by the higher leaders as a good advertisement for the MCC. So in the end I decided not to go. However, the pressure from Khand for me to join them only increased. Like Shiv, I found myself trying to avoid him, thus cutting off this source of information on the spread of the MCC in the area.

Nevertheless, by this time, I was certain of several patterns of MCC operation. The most striking aspect of Shiv's story is the fear that the MCC induces among its targets at this local level. This is not a fear of those individuals one knows are involved in the MCC. Instead, it is of non-cooperation with the more sublime *idea* of the MCC as a very powerful, almost mythical and mystical, organization. In this sense the idea of the MCC is similar to that which both Taussig (1984) and Mitchell (2002) suggest of the state, where fear is always stronger in the absence of the thing that causes it than in its presence.

This idea of the immense power of the MCC is perpetuated in several ways. First, it is created through a reputation of a highly centralized, hierarchical and organized movement – that each region is divided into zones, sub-zones, areas, and villages; that all these divisions have hierarchically connected leaders; and that the overall purpose is to create a Maoist belt from Nepal to Andhra. An image of a complex system of rules that cover even minute details adds to the MCC's reputation as a highly organized movement. Indeed, as an example, my informants would often say that there were even guidelines for how people who were contemplating joining the MCC could, with permission, use the name 'MCC' to further their *do number* activities.

Secondly, the image of immense power is perpetuated through the clandestine nature of the MCC – a mysterious movement of opaque secrets and hidden resources. For instance, people recruited at the local level have only vague ideas about who else is actually involved above their Area Commander. They will also have little idea, as shown in the next section, of the members of geographically adjoining MCC factions. Moreover, people at the local level think that such a clandestine structure is so



strategically constructed by a very organized movement so that if one member is caught, they can only reveal a very limited amount about the organization. This cloud of secrecy generates uncertainty about the size and spread of the organization. An *idea* is created that the MCC are or could be anywhere and everywhere – a kind of folklore about their spread. Although this idea is dependent on secrecy, as in Parry's (2000) discussion of corruption, it is also perpetuated by the apparent breach of secrecy – the leak here and there that the MCC has arrived in x village, is planning y case, that the police are giving MCC inside information, or even through taking the journalist or the foreign anthropologist to a 'so-called' MCC hideout. The secrecy and breach of secrecy enhance the idea of the MCC as an organization of great power and subsequently makes people fear the consequences of not supporting it. This, in turn, enhances its spread. In areas of new expansion it is easy for someone to suspect that anyone else could be involved. This creates the impression that everyone is involved, and helps to secure everyone's involvement. Shiv with his escape, like that of Spencer's (2000) friend Piyasena in a Sinhala village in Sri Lanka, shows how within this dominant frame of fear it is not easy to find individuals who actively resist involvement in the violence (or the threat of violence) and do not become a "terrorist".

A third crucial dimension of the MCC's image of power is linked to its capacity for violence. Media reports spread chilling news of the MCC's notorious violence elsewhere in Bihar and Jharkhand. The threat of violence is perpetuated by the MCC strategy of disarming an area it aims to expand in. In April-June 1999, when I was living in Bero hanging around the Block Development Office, the MCC demanded and collected all registered rifles and guns in Bero. These weapons were usually in the possession of the old *zamindar* descendant elites. The most common way for the MCC to take weapons was to first send a letter of threat demanding them. This would then be followed by an unannounced visit in the middle of the night by a group of armed MCC men to take the weapons away.<sup>100</sup> The weapons are no doubt re-used by the MCC underground armies

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<sup>100</sup> I know of one case where a man was asked to deliver his gun and rifle to the MCC through his house maid's relative who had allegedly joined the MCC. On the failure to deliver his gun and rifle, eight men who identified themselves as MCC came one night when he was absent and blindfolded and kidnapped his

and this is one of the benefits of a disarming strategy. At the local level there is, however, another pivotal result - the establishment of fear through a reproduction of an idea of the power of an armed organization in a disarmed area.

It is possible that the MCC also strategically engage in frequent and geographically specific violence to create tales of fear that perpetuate its power. In the Bero area, for instance, in the early days of MCC expansion, a massacre in a nearby village established fear of the MCC. On 14th September 2000, nine Muslims were shot and four injured in Narkopi village about twelve kilometres to the West of Bero by a group of armed uniformed men who then disappeared into the surrounding landscape shouting, 'Long Live MCC!'

There is probably far more to be said about this last incident. What, for instance, were the Maoists doing shooting Muslims? Was it, as it claimed, simply shooting a gang of criminals who allegedly looted market stalls and raped the mothers and sisters of local men? Or was it playing with communal fire - was it the militant right-wing Hindu nationalist *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) in disguise addressing the concerns of a Hinduised political elite in Bero and feeding off the growing Hindu-Muslim tension? Or was it playing out a class battle as the Narkopi Muslims, sons of old *zamindar* elites, were increasingly buying property and shops in Bero and threatening pre-existing Bero elites? Or was it a bit of all?

I am afraid that despite the massacre's proximity to me in terms of time and location, I was not able to acquire accounts more detailed than those obtained by journalists in Bero and reported in newspapers.<sup>101</sup> This is symptomatic of the larger problem of the

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wife. They left a note written and signed by his wife that, 'The MCC have kidnapped me. They want our guns. Please send them by 6.00pm or they will kill me.' The man sent the gun immediately but had deposited the rifle at the local police station. Fortunately, as he knew the local policemen well, he was able to bribe them to return his rifle and then sent it off to the MCC. His wife was returned as soon as they received the second arm and said she had been treated gently and with respect.

<sup>101</sup> 13 September 2000, *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, p1-3.

difficulty of researching a so-called 'terrorist' organization. For example, consider the case of the *Ali Sena*, reputed in Ranchi circles to be the Narkopi-based Muslim army set up in retaliation to the MCC's atrocities. By the time I left, it was said to have disintegrated and, in fact, some local people suggested that it might actually have been called *Raksha Dal* or even *Jan Mancha*. I cannot be certain whether the organization ever existed or whether it was created at the time as a part mythical entity. It is, for instance, easy to imagine a scenario that local journalists, inspired by the idea of the *Senas* such as the *Ranvir Sena* of central Bihar (created as the *zamindar* opposition to the MCC), labeled a few Muslim reactionaries 'the *Ali Sena*' and in doing so perpetuated a discourse in Ranchi and Bero about the existence of an *Ali Sena*.

Despite all this mystery, there is one other evident pattern of MCC operation. This is that at the local level the MCC expands through an already closely connected set of people acquainted by kinship, fictive kinship or friendship.<sup>102</sup> Indeed by the time Shiv left, it was clear that the Mandar faction of the MCC were expanding through people who had previously been strong supporters of Vishwanath Bhagat, during his JMM campaign, and who, over the years had become dissatisfied with him and his inability to fulfill promises of better access to state resources (Chapter 4). As such, as the MCC expands in the Bero area, there is possibly a strong case to be made that its pattern of expansion reflects a pre-existing history of organization of people connected by their earlier involvement in the JMM. Duyker (1987) makes a strong case for this point in his study of Santhali involvement in the Midnapore Naxalite uprising. He argues that it was successful in areas where people had already participated in local mass-movements (Duyker, 1987: 104).

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<sup>102</sup> Although I do not have enough evidence of MCC spread in captured areas, it is likely that in many contexts kinship organization is a central force in mobilizing support. This is a point well made by Duyker who draws on an interview with the Superintendent of Police in Midnapore in 1969-1970 that, 'during the Midnapore uprising many Santhals provided food and shelter to Santhal activists out of kinship obligations rather than for ideological reasons.' (Duyker, 1987: 104).

The most striking aspect of this closely connected set of people, at this most local level of MCC expansion, is that they are not a poor tribal peasantry but an already established political elite. Many of the tribal peasants in Tapu had not heard about the MCC, and those that had believed that the organization existed in other areas. Indeed, when I tried to push them on who the MCC might be, most tribal peasants had the ambiguous idea that it was a group that moved around the countryside and committed violence. They certainly had no idea that members of the MCC had come to their village.

The political elite that the MCC entered the Tapu area through was not necessarily caste based. Rather it was both those of an older elite status from a *zamindar* lineage, as in the case of Akshay, Chandra and Anil, and those of a newer educated (and often tribal) elite, as in the case of Shiv and Khand. From Khand's point of view, Shiv was a particularly attractive potential agent of MCC expansion into Tapu because of their previous acquaintance through Vishwanath Bhagat's election campaign. However, in the vacuum created by Shiv's escape, I suspect that the next most obvious target for MCC expansion into Tapu would have been Neel or Popat Odhar, - the young, politically active men of the *zamindar* lineage in Tapu. Indeed it was these two men that Shiv had confided in when he was first approached by the MCC.

The MCC's expansion through a political elite indicates that the boundary between the state and the MCC is relatively porous. Chapter 3 showed that the political elite maintained (in the case of the descendants of *zamindars*) or created (in the case of the newer elite) its position through extensive links with the state. They were financially better off than the tribal peasantry in villages like Tapu because of their participation in state schemes. They had intimate connections to, and links with, state officials and were especially interested in siphoning off money from Block Development Schemes by becoming contractors (Chapter 4). In fact, the MCC expected that the bread and butter of its supporters at expansion fronts would be the guarantee of illicit sums from state schemes. The backing of the MCC encouraged the idea that competitors for these state resources would be scared off, and that state officials be more compliant, for fear of the MCC. Thus the most striking feature of MCC expansion in the Tapu area is that it is

neither based on contesting the power of established politician-contractor groupings nor on defying the state and its officers. Rather, the MCC expansion at this local level is based on working in collaboration with political-contractor groupings and, indeed, interaction with the state. There is often, however, an even more direct connection between the state and the MCC as the following case demonstrates.

### **The State and the MCC**

At the same time that Shiv was initially being introduced to the MCC, a parallel set of events were occurring in the vicinity of Tapu that he was unaware of. In the preceding year, Vishwanath Bhagat had lodged a proposal to the Ministry of Rural Development for Rs629000 to build a dirt road through the forest between Baridih and Bhasnanda to replace the walking track. Being one of the larger projects of the Block, the road would have involved substantial commissions for those involved in its construction. It so happened that the year the road was sanctioned, the District Commissioner in Ranchi ordered the contractor of this scheme to be a Block Official and not a villager. Thus when the road was sanctioned, the Block Development Officer decided to keep Vishwanath Bhagat in the dark and selected his favoured Block Official, a *Panchayat Sevak* by the name of Khasi, as the contractor for the job. The BDO feared that if Vishwanath knew of the sanctioning, he would enforce his preferred Block Official and the illicit sums to be gained from the implementation of the scheme would go into Vishwanath's pockets, rather than his own. The BDO had appointed Khasi largely because of the latter's reputation of being feeble and inexperienced. Thus, in order to ensure that the work was completed, the BDO also asked for the services of Bhavesh.

My account of the building of this road is constructed from Bhavesh's account. Bhavesh was my neighbour in Bero when I lived there for two months in my pre-fieldwork stint in 2000. A few years elder than me, we became friends during the long hot evenings of the summer, when he would wander over to my house. At the time he was single and

although I can never be certain, there was something about his approach in those days that made me slightly wary that as a newcomer himself to the Bero area, also having traveled far and wide and alone, he felt a certain affinity to me that made him hope that I might one day be his wife. Over time, as he realized that I was never going to stay in the Bero area and I tried to carefully manoeuvre our relationship so that he could have no illusions, our relationship matured and he became more interested in forming a friendship with a woman who he could drink and travel with like any other man, an idea that he had not previously entertained. And so we came to develop mutual respect for each other and he became one of my most trusted friends.

Bhavesh, although easily mistaken as such, was not a state official. Over the preceding ten years, he had developed the reputation of being the best engineer around and for knowing the local terrain like the back of his hand. He had come to Bero in the late eighties as an engineer of the Frick Company that was involved in the building of the Bero Cold Storage, a government undertaking brought by the then MLA Ganga Bhagat. Bhavesh had advised the Block Assistant Engineer responsible for the project, as he apparently had a very low technical knowledge. The Assistant Engineer, impressed, gave Bhavesh other Block Office contracts falling in his jurisdiction along with half of the illicit 2% he took off the total sum of the scheme. By the late 1990s Block Officers, and especially Block Engineers, relied on Bhavesh to help them on large projects since, because of their rapid transfers, they could not establish familiarity of the local terrain. Bhavesh had become almost a permanent contractor for large Block schemes.

One day over lunch in Akshay's *line hotel*, a Block Office clerk leaked to Vishwanath the news that the Baridih-Bhasnanda road had been signed and that the agent had been confirmed. Vishwanath was furious. He stormed to the BDO's office where the BDO firmly told him that the *Panchayat Sevak* Khasi would construct the road. Vishwanath, no longer having powers over the BDO as his MLA days were over, called Khasi to his house. He told Khasi to take his fixed percentage but insisted that he, Vishwanath, would be the agent that would carry out the implementation of the road. Khasi, under instruction from the BDO, knowing that there was far more money than the fixed

percentage to be illicitly gained in the cuts from the building of the road, turned to Bhavesh for assistance. Bhavesh, who had contacts with the MCC to the West of Bero in Bharno, suggested to the BDO and Khasi that they visit his 'friends'. Khasi and Bhavesh thus asked the MCC to safeguard the road in exchange for 5% off its total price. The MCC, in any case wanting to expand in the concerned area, agreed. Thus, a few days later Vishwanath Bhagat and Akshay Roy (once his right-hand man) were called to Bharno where they were told to lay their hands off the road. Scared of the MCC, Vishwanath and Akshay backed off and the work on the road began headed by the *Panchayat Sevak*. Labour from Tapu, Bhasnanda and Baridih began building the road.

I left Bero soon after and did not hear the end of the story. However, the proceedings till then revealed a number of points. Recall that Akshay was already involved in the MCC of the Mandar branch to whom he had been introduced by Khand.<sup>103</sup> Why then did he not use them to remove Khasi from Vishwanath Bhagat's prized project? The problem was the organizational expansion of the MCC and the extent of their secrecy. Bero area fell on the borders of the Hazaribagh and Palamau zones of MCC expansion and at that stage it was not clear which zone was responsible for expansion into exactly which area of Bero. Whereas the Mandar faction (Khand and Shiv) was under the Hazaribagh zone, the road faction (Bhavesh and Khasi) was under the Palamau zone. When Akshay and Vishwanath visited the Palamau faction, Akshay did not recognize the MCC members that he met and could not use his previous connections. As a result of the secrecy around the operation of the organization he did not know enough about its organizational structure and the connections between different factions to try to use his preexisting MCC connections, as Bhavesh had done, to his advantage.

The most striking aspect of the story of the road is the connection between the state and the MCC. In this case, state officials of the Block Office were calling on the MCC to protect them to ensure that they could make illicit profits from the construction of a road to be built by the state. The state officials (Khasi and the BDO) wanted protection from a

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<sup>103</sup> Many of Vishwanath Bhagat's keen supporters had become disillusioned by him (Chapter 4) and were slowly getting more involved with the MCC who promised to better fulfill their needs.

contesting claim to the illicit resources that they were being made by an ex-representative of the state (Vishwanath Bhagat). In return the MCC was promised a set percentage of illicit money off the total cost of the building of the road. Neither was the MCC working in opposition to state officials nor the state officials working in opposition to the MCC. Rather, the MCC and the state officials were working in clear collaboration with each other to suit each other's end goals.

What I hope this case conveys is how at the very local level the boundaries between the actual practices of the MCC and the state can become very blurred. I was constantly reminded by people in Bero that the MCC has its people and supporters everywhere, even in the state – block officials, forest officials, police - who have a double identity and beneath their state uniforms, are actually MCC men. So perhaps there is something to be said for the gossip that circulates, even in Ranchi circles, that the MCC has helped many government functionaries and Congressmen, BJP leaders and RJD leaders, and even that the Jharkhand's Land Reforms and Revenue Minister is an ex-PWG squad commander.<sup>104</sup> It is possible that the converse also applies – so that even though MCC cells are likely to be infiltrated by police and intelligence informers, they may also benefit from the assistance of state officials and/or government representatives.

### **The MCC's Alternative Vision?: Controlling Tribal Drinking Practices**

While in practice the boundaries between the MCC and the state are fuzzy, the significant blood-curdling figures of police deaths show that there is a sense in which the MCC is against the present state. However, in as far as it appears to be against the present modern state, it behaves as though it were a state itself and hence should not be understood to be against the *idea* of the state. Indeed, it seems that the ideological goal of the MCC is to become (like) a state – to collect taxes, solve disputes, control all arms, have its own army.

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<sup>104</sup> *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, 6 December 2001, p 11.



In fact there is a sense in which the activities of the MCC versus the modern state, and vice versa, recreate the legitimacy of the other as an organizational form. A symbiotic relationship exists between the modern state and the MCC in which the public activity of one against the other actually extends the visibility of the idea of both.<sup>105</sup> For example, in creating extremism as a problem, the Jharkhand State gets extra funds from the central government - in 2000-2001, the police had a budgetary allocation of Rs8000000, half of which, that allocated by the Centre, was specifically for police modernisation in the light of the Naxalite problem. Through such action, the state not only enhances the terror and power of the MCC, it also promotes the power of the state itself. As Sinha suggests in relation to Andhra Pradesh, 'in many places the first direct contact which the people have had with the state machinery has been through the Maoist movement and the state's reaction to it. The policeman, the administrator and even the local MLA or MP who, to those in the remote areas where the movement first took root were mythical characters, almost became part and parcel of their daily life' (Sinha, 1989: 317).

In as far as the MCC is against the present modern state, it is important to analyse its alternative visions of a better state. Are these visions more sensitive to the needs of poor tribal peasants in villages like Tapu than that of the Jharkhandi activists wanting a better Jharkhand State for adivasis? Without having access to higher level members of the MCC, it is difficult to know the details and conflicts of the broader picture of MCC visions that are more insightful than the MCC's own public rhetoric. One can, however, extrapolate at what these visions might be from the social reform campaigns its lower level members are asked to engage in. Indeed, local level campaigns are important for the MCC to gain a more concrete presence and to enhance mobilization in a particular area. Jharkhandi activists in Ranchi claim that the MCC faces problems of expansion in

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<sup>105</sup> Heyman's (1999) edited volume also illuminates the important point of how state and non-state activities, in the context of legality and illegality, enjoy a symbiosis and must be studied together. For example, criminal underworlds, pirates and brigands, black markets, illegal immigrants, smugglers, protection rackets – these topics do not stand apart from the state, nor the state from them (Heyman and Smart, 1999: 1).

the more tribal dominated areas of Jharkhand. Here, they say, unlike the central plains of Bihar or the more northern Jharkhandi Districts of Palamau, Hazaribagh and Garwha, there are neither big landlords nor large numbers of landless peasants.<sup>106</sup> The challenge for the MCC is thus the basis on which they can mobilize support for the poor?

Similar to other revolutionary movements (c.f. Brownell (1995) on the training of the body for Mao's China, for example), the evidence from the Bero area suggests that, in part, this idea of a new state embraces an alternative and more perfect vision of modernity and morality in which more disciplined tribals better control their drinking and sex lives. For example, of the five cases of MCC dispute solving I came to hear about in more captured villages than Tapu, three concerned cases of post-marital affairs and resulted in the beating of the lover. The MCC appeared to be repeating the strategies of the JMM who a few years beforehand had been 'solved' cases of illicit sexual relations in their *parha* meetings and had formed a new vision of tribal identity in which tribal women were to be less loose and all tribals to better control their sex lives. In fact, the Ranchi Jharkhandi activists have also advised the MCC that one of the next major local level campaigns in Jharkhand should be against migration to the brick kilns.<sup>107</sup> As

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<sup>106</sup> Of course, even in those areas reputed to have large landlords, there is reason to doubt that MCC mobilization at the grassroots level is in line with Maoist ideology - as Bhatia suggests, in practice the issues for struggle taken up by the Naxalites are determined largely by local situations as, 'in order to win the support of the people the Naxalite movement had to address their immediate concerns, which pertain primarily to their everyday existence rather than to revolutionary change' (Bhatia, 2000: 81).

<sup>107</sup> Along with a campaign against brick kiln and domestic labour migration from Jharkhand, a campaign against big development projects like the World Bank funded Koel-Karo dam and a campaign to promote traditional tribal self rule through the *parhas* and the *mankis* are planned. There is of course far more to be said about all this. For example, it is clear that the movement against the Koel-Karo dam has been heavily influenced by the movement against the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat, Western India (cf Baviskar, 2001) based on the idea that the tribals of that area had lived on the land from which they were being displaced for centuries and that displacement would violate all their basic rights. What is unclear about the Koel-Karo resistance as well as the Narmada one, is that from the point of view of those being moved, to what extent displacement really is the problem and to what extent is it actually only the resettlement package which is a major concern. In other words, to what extent are the campaigns more a reflection of the 'tribal

I argued in Chapter 5, underpinning this anti-migration campaign is the desire to create a 'new and better' image of tribal identity that is removed from its sexually promiscuous and amoral past.

Here, however, I would like to concentrate on the MCC's campaign to control drinking. In December 2000, when I was living in Tapu, some posters appeared on the walls of the market place, the Block Office and some shops in Bero. Their message was that drinking alcohol in the area must be stopped and that it was the aim of the MCC to ensure this happened. A few weeks later, in the weekly market in Jahanabaj village to the immediate West of Tapu, a group of uniformed men armed with sticks drove up to the market stalls in jeeps and said they were the MCC. They told the alcohol sellers and their customers huddled at the edge of the market to shut down and threatened to beat them if they did not or if they reopened. The men marched up and down menacingly and, as the frightened vendors scattered, broke some pots of alcohol. Then, before the police arrived, they left as abruptly as they had appeared.

There are several implications of this campaign that are worth noting. The people that sell alcohol in the market place are usually tribal peasants. Although there may be a few regular sellers, many brew alcohol to sell on an irregular basis – on occasions when they have no vegetables or other resources for the weekly household income. The alcohol they make is either a beer brewed from rice called *hadia* or the stronger *mahua-pani*, distilled from the *mahua* flower. They rarely come with more than a few pots of alcohol to sell and their customers are usually other tribal peasants, keen to have a drink in the weekly market, before returning on the walk home.

Those who sell alcohol on a more regular basis are of two categories. The first is the *mahua-pani* vendor who sells his brew from his house, which is one of the *mahua-pani* shops in the village. This person is usually a descendant of the old tenants of a landlord who has joined the local political elite as a result of new wealth acquired from their

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identity' proposed by an elite of campaigners rather than the concerns of those actually immediately affected by such projects.

alcohol distilling activities.<sup>108</sup> Tribal peasants who drink the brew made in each other's homes claim that this more mass-produced *mahua-pani* is not as good. They say it contains a 'medicine' that makes drunkenness give one a headache. They say it is not as pure as the alcohol they distil in their own homes – it is not as good for the soul. The second category of seller of more mass produced alcohol does not trade local varieties of alcohol but sells the 'English' versions, 'Royal Challenge', 'Old Monk' – usually whisky, rum and sometimes, gin and beer. Only a few people sell this type of brew and in the Tapu area, they are all located in Bero (in a shop, *line-hotel* and restaurant) and do not have a license. The sellers are all descendants of the old *zamindars* from the surrounding villages who have set up business in Bero.

The first interesting aspect of the anti-drinking MCC campaign is that it did not threaten the political elite of sellers. Indeed, given the arguments of this chapter, that the MCC is not expanding through a tribal peasantry but through a political elite, it seems logical that its campaigns should not threaten its basis of expansion. For instance, one of the Bero *English* sellers was Akshay Roy who, as I have shown, was also involved in the MCC expansion.

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<sup>108</sup> In Tapu, for example, people say that the only ex-tenant whose wealth can today match that of some of the *ex-zamindar* descendants, is a Badaik man who got rich on mass producing *mahua-pani*. He constructed a little mud hut, by the forest and the river and away from all the hamlets to dodge the excise people and brew alcohol. People say that he made the alcohol in the night and then hid the pots of brew in the sand on the river's bank. He used to send the alcohol to his wife's elder sister's house in Bero from where it was sold. It is though that every day at least 20 litres were sent to Bero and at the rate of Rs10 for a bottle of 750 ml, he used to make just less than Rs270 a day. About seven years ago, the *zamindar* descendants, jealous of his accumulating wealth, one night when the Badaik was away, threatened the two Munda men who worked for him and told them to stop, destroyed the hut and all the pots of alcohol. Nevertheless, the Badaik by that time had accumulated sufficient wealth to reckon with some of the *zamindar* descendants, had stopped drinking himself and had sent his children to college in Ranchi and acquired a government job in the railways for his first son. Although he had joined a political elite of the area, in Tapu, the tension between him and the *zamindar* descendant houses continued to the extent that when he had acquired funds to build an IAS house, he constructed it in Bero, not Tapu, with the plan of moving there.

It is worth noting here that although the MCC banned consumption of alcohol amongst its members, it was common for the political elite to entice them to drinking sessions. These drinking practices of the political elite were different to those of the tribal peasants in several respects. Firstly local varieties of alcohol, *hadia* and *mahua-pani*, were considered distasteful. Although they sometimes drunk these local brews, they gave the *English* varieties of alcohol a much higher consumer status. Secondly different generations were never seen drinking together and it was considered disrespectful for a young person to drink in front of an older person. Thirdly, although I had known some women to drink in private, the theory was that women were not to drink at all. Drinking, even in the company of others, was considered, for all, an activity not for the public eye. Hence, the common outcome for the political elite in Bero was groups of young men hiding in dark spaces behind curtains consuming bottle after bottle of whisky and rum.

The second interesting aspect of this anti-drinking campaign is that it targeted a poor tribal peasantry. Why? A common discourse on tribal development, or 'underdevelopment' as it is often described in the Jharkhandi area, is that tribals are *jungli* (literally meaning 'from the jungle' but implying wild, savage, dirty and backward), and one of the most dominant aspects of this *jungliness* is their copious drinking that is seen to make them less disciplined workers but also amoral, primitive bodies.

From the tribal point of view, drinking practices appeared very differently. Although there were three tribal men and one tribal woman in Tapu who had the reputation among other tribal people of drinking whenever they pleased, most other tribals followed very specific norms around drinking. On a weekly basis drinking happened on market days, Monday and Thursday, in the market place and at the stalls on the way back to the villages. It reminded me very much of Friday back in England where people end up at the pub after a long week of work. In addition to market day, *hadia* or *mahua-pani* was consumed on several other occasions.<sup>109</sup> It was required to welcome guests. It was also compulsory on all ritual occasions and gave these local varieties of alcohol sacred

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<sup>109</sup> See also Lakra (2001) on 'Rice-beer in Tribal culture'.

symbolisms. In fact no ritual could take place without *hadia* and no human could drink without offering the first drops to the spirits. In marriage, drink was very important not only to serve the guests but also to signify the union of the bride and the groom when they drank *hadia* from the same leaf cup. The local alcohols were also essential in times when labour was voluntarily exchanged (*madaiti*) for harvesting, building houses and especially in the rice-sowing, *ropa*, season. It was customary that the owner of the fields sown served drink to the people that had helped prepare the fields. Not only were there these very specific occasions for drinking but also, particular instances of drinking were always publicly displayed. The general etiquette was that for people of marriageable age or above, all generations and both sexes would be involved in drinking together, although it was common on ritual occasions for the elder men to be served first by the younger men.

Hence, analysis of the anti-drinking campaign of the MCC suggests a case similar to that of the Jharkhandi activists campaign against brick kiln migration, and its alleged vision of a better Jharkhand. Indeed, the MCC's vision of an alternative, and supposedly more perfect modernity, does not at all target the local political elites who become powerful on the labour of a poorer tribal peasantry. Rather, the MCC's vision targets the customs and practices of the poorer tribal peasantry and, therefore, controls and represses those sections of the society that it allegedly wishes to serve.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The consequence of researching a terrorist organization without appearing to be doing so is that it would be premature to make all-encompassing conclusions. Nevertheless, I am struck by the disjunction between the popular media and academic perception of MCC activity, and the actual evidence of it at the local level. While others have described that at the upper levels the dominant influence within the Naxalites have been upper castes

and classes (Bhatia, 2000: 162),<sup>110</sup> they have considered lower levels to involve and support the poor. This elite maintained its dominant position largely through its connection with the state. It supported the MCC because it promised protection and security to capture state further resources. Rather than working against the political elite, the MCC worked in collaboration with them to become entwined in, and benefit from, the processes of the state. And in several contexts, the MCC's link with the state was often even more direct as state officials themselves sought the help of the MCC and colluded with them. The evidence suggests, in fact, that at this local level of expansion, the boundary between the state and the MCC is highly porous. Moreover, it suggests that, contrary to popular media and academic suggestions, the expansion practice of the MCC at this very local level is not anti-state.

I have suggested that in some sense the MCC does appear to be against the present modern state though not against the idea of the state itself. As such, in its vision of an alternative state, I argue that the MCC is aiming for a 'better' modernity. This more utopian vision includes the control of the drinking and sexual practices of a tribal peasantry in the name of producing better, more disciplined and more moral selves. Very much like the Jharkhandi activists, the MCC once again ensures that those who stand to lose from such a campaign are not the local political elite but the poorer tribal peasantry.

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<sup>110</sup> Dalit critics of the Naxalite movement have accused it of being '*Brahminwadi*' (Bhatia: 2000: 162)

**Figure 8: Table to show major MCC strikes in Jharkhand (December 2000 – October 2001)<sup>111</sup>**

Date	Place	Incident
December 1	Murgu Village, Gumla District	4 villagers killed
December 4	Latehar District	2 villagers killed
December 12	Giddhaur, Chatra District	Block Development Officer abducted and killed
January 3	Bhavesmath, Palamau	Police vehicle blown up in landmine
February 18	Ichak, Hazaribagh District	Police vehicle torched
March 30	Gumla District	4 villagers killed
April 14	Beltu, Hazaribagh District	14 villagers killed: 12 hacked and 2 burnt
May 8	Bundu, Ranchi District	4 villagers killed
June 8	Kusumba, Giridih District	Police picket attacked and 1 policeman killed
June 15	Vishrampur, Palamau District	Attack on police station
July 5	Keradari, Hazaribagh District	8 people killed
July 5	Piprawar, Ranchi District	11 police rifles and ammunition looted from Home Guards
August 4	Gomia, Bokaro District	Policeman night-watchman killed
August 5	Daltongunj, Palamau District	Kill 3 Muslims
August 17	Dhanbad and Giridih Districts	Boycott Independence day celebrations and unfurl black flags in several places
August 21	Tirsi Block, Giridih District	Kill a suspected police informer
August 26	Grand Trunk Road, Giridih District	Six loaded trucks abducted
August 27	Kasiadih village, Giridih District	Two police personnel killed and six injured
September 5	Entire State of Jharkhand	Announces 72 hour ban on movement of vehicles in entire state protesting conviction of 4 activists involved in Bara massacre in Central Bihar when 34 Bhuinhars were killed by MCC in 1992.
September 6	Latehar District	5, including 3 policemen killed
September 23	Churchu, Hazaribagh District	12 including 11 policemen killed in landmine blast
September 24	Giridih District	Attack on Superintendent of Police who escapes
September 25	Latehar District	3 people killed
September 29	Bariadih, Koderma District	Burn alive a cop and a police jeep
October 4	Garwha District	Deputy Superintendent of Police and three other police killed in landmine blast
October 13	Daltonganj, Palamu	1 cop killed
October 24	Gomia, Bokaro District	1 cop killed and 4 critically injured
October 31	Topchanchi Block, Dhanbad District	12 Jharkhand Armed Police and 1 washerman killed in an attack on a police picket
November 7	Lohardaga District	1 policeman killed

<sup>111</sup> Source: Compiled by author from reports in the *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi.



**Figure 9: Table to show the police's 'achievements against extremism' (1999 to September 2001)<sup>112</sup>**

<i>Subject</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>
Acts of extremism	213	175	865
Policemen killed	29	18	20
Extremists killed	6	2	18
Others killed	10	11	80
Police encounters	32	20	60
Attacks on police stations or pickets	7	5	2
Police arms looted	34	32	45
Extremist Ambush	0	0	5

<i>Recovery from extremists</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>
Police arms	2	0	7
Regular arms	11	14	69
Country-made arms	31	45	272
Ammunition	349	206	4752
Cartridges	61	610	1545
Detonators	41	2	1730
Gelatines	20	1572	39
Landmines	1	9	8
Explosives	0.5 kg	0	79.5 kg
Fuse wire	0	0	145 metres
Crude Bombs	3	0	58
Chargers	0	0	19
Bunkers	0	0	12
Training camps	0	0	7
Cash	0	0	Rs5000000
Jewelry	0	0	Worth Rs 117000
Telephone sets	0	0	2
Two-wheelers	0	0	13

<sup>112</sup> Source: Office of Director General of Police, Jharkhand, printed in *Hindustan Times*, Ranchi, Sept 23 2001: 2.

## Conclusion

Indians have experienced more than fifty years of the developmental and democratic modern state of independent India. During my research in Tapu village, Ranchi District, Jharkhand State, I explored the social processes that impact upon the way in which different local people understand and engage with the modern state.

Recent work on the state in India has highlighted tensions or misunderstandings between the desires of the central state designers and the accounts of state action taking place at the local level. This gap is said to pose problems for the developmental ambitions of the central state (Inden, 1995). Indeed, some commentators point to an essential difference of understanding between a so-called nationalist 'elite', who bought into the idea of a modern rational state, and the 'lower orders' who are at the receiving end of state policies and programmes and who are unable to understand the ideas of the state (Kaviraj, 1984; 1991). The implication is that state ideas designed at the centre are essentially untransferable to the local level.

In this thesis I have problematised accounts of the state that show people at the local level to be one unitary mass. I have demonstrated that, in the Tapu area, there are at least two main groups of people – a poorer tribal peasantry and a local political elite. The former are usually ex-tenants of the old *zamindars* of the area, classified by the government as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or Backward Class. They depend mainly on their land and hard manual labour for a livelihood. The latter are usually the higher caste descendants of the old *zamindars*, or tribal people who have moved up the social hierarchy most commonly through education. They aspire to end their dependence on land (and manual labour) for their livelihood and strive for government jobs. As most of them do not get these prized positions, they seek instead to supplement their income by running private businesses, appropriating state resources, or both.

The central arguments of the thesis were developed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. To investigate the way in which different local people understand and interact with the

modern state, I began by exploring the historical development of the relationship between these two groups of local people (Chapter 2). This demonstrated that, in Tapu today, a simple patron-client analysis of the relationship between the *zamindar* descendants and the tenant descendants serves to obstruct a deeper analysis of the social processes (Gilsenan, 1977). Moreover, it was argued that *zamindar* and tenant descendant relationships must also be explored with respect to their different, and interrelated, understandings of their spiritual and temporal worlds.

I have argued that from the perspective of the Munda tribal peasant descendants of Tapu, Mundas play the superior spiritual function as a result of their ability to control the spirits. This is an ability that arises out of their first settler status, symbolic though it may be. In the Munda world-view, although some spirits themselves may be dangerous, all aspects of life not legitimized by the spiritual world have the possibility of being dangerous. In this way, the *zamindar* descendants are legitimized as patrons to the tribal peasants, in a similar way to the 'jungle kings' of Orissa (Schnepel, 1995), because they were historically legitimized by the spirits and supported their spiritual world. In contrast, the modern state and its officials are seen by the Mundas as new, foreign, and not legitimized by the spirits and, as such, are considered dangerous.

The *zamindar* descendants were shown, however, to regard the Munda's control of spirits as lowly exorcism (as suggested by Dumont and Pocock, 1959), as in their own world-view superior sacred functions are now performed by a Brahmin priest. I have also demonstrated that this local political elite understands the rationality behind the modern state. In contrast to the arguments of some of the culturalist critiques of the Indian state (cf. Chatterjee, 1986; 1996; Kaviraj, 1984; 1991; 1997; Madan, 1997; Nandy, 1989; Saberwal, 1996) that suggest state institutions do not command an understanding on the ground, I have shown, with respect to ideas of the developmental state as a guarantor of a social order (Chapter 3) and with respect to ideas of democracy (Chapter 4), that amongst these people at the local level, an inability to understand state ideas and designs is not a problem attributable to all rural Jharkhandis. In fact, the local

elite were shown to have the capacity to both understand state ideas and make the state work for themselves.

I have also argued, however, that the internalization and commitment to state ideas by this elite is not simply secured by understandings. I have shown that in some ways the activities of state officials and local elites have parallels with the analysis of the rent-seeking models of the Indian state (Kreuger, 1974; Lal, 1988; Bhagwati, 1993), where the state is seen mainly as a resource for vested interests and not as a public interest state (Wade, 1985). This is not to imply, however, that the local elites are solely economically driven. Indeed, I have shown that the way in which they come to interact with the state is influenced by a number of other concerns, such as boredom in the village and the challenge to achieve a new status in a changing context. The central point, however, is that such concerns are guided by a view amongst the elite that the ultimate locally accepted challenge of state interaction is the secural of resources from it.

In this vein, it has also been argued that particular MLA candidates win the support of members of the local elite on the basis of whether they think the candidate will enable their better access to state resources (Chapter 4). These resources are not only those that are to be gained legally, but also (and especially) those from state development programmes (often in the name of the poor) that are acquired through routinised and institutionalized systems of corruption (Chapter 3). Corruption is not, however, symptomatic of a misunderstanding of state intentions, as Karviraj (1991) would argue, but an indication of a lack of commitment to state norms where notions of legality do not necessarily match notions of morality. Indeed, I have shown that there is a moral economy (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976) to these systems of corruption such that problems arise largely when people operate outside the received norms of these practices, and not necessarily just because they are engaging in illegal acts.

Through these practices, I have shown how the state is profoundly penetrated by the local elite. Moreover, I have demonstrated how local officials blur the distinction between their roles and styles of operation as public servants and as private citizens

(Fuller and Harriss, 2001; Gupta, 1995) such that the Indian state can appear as 'the private status state' (Harriss-White: 90). As such, the boundary between the state and society has been considered as being elusive (Abrams, 1988; Migdal, 1994; Mitchell, 1991). For the political elite of the Tapu area, as in Brass's description of police action in Uttar Pradesh, it is not only a simple case 'of the agents of the state misusing their powers against innocent persons, but a social system in which all are engaged in such actions,' (Brass, 1997: 274).

I have argued, however, that tribal peasants do not participate in this social system of engagement with the modern state. Tribal peasants did not distinguish between the sublime idea of the state, and the everyday practices around it. Indeed, to the tribal peasants, the state is almost a black-box, a foreign body, that is separate from, alien to, and dangerous for them. In contrast to the local elite, therefore, the tribal peasants' understanding of the state is an example of where a boundary between the state and society is clearly drawn (Mitchell, 1990). As in Nugent's analysis of post 1960s Chachapoyas, Peru, these 'local people knew exactly what 'the state' was, and it was not they' (2001: 276).

The idea of the modern state as a guarantor of a particular social order thus has little legitimacy to the tribal peasants. This was especially because it was seen as outside, foreign and not validated by the tribal spiritual world. The modern state and its agents were seen as exploitative and destructive outsiders, and responsible for in particular the weakening of the sacred tribal *parha* that was thought to protect tribal society. As such, the tribal peasants chose to stay away from the modern state. In this regard, Gell's (1999) analysis of the Dasara ritual indicates a similar view of the state amongst the Gond tribals of Bastar. In Bastar, in the Dasara ritual, the Gond tribals exalted the king in order to obstruct the state (Gell, 1999: 280). In the Tapu area the MLAs, elected representatives of the state, were supported by tribal peasants not, as most of the literature on democracy and good governance assumes (Jalal, 1991; Kohli, 1987, 1991, 2001; World Bank, 1997), in order to have greater participation in state processes, but to

protect tribal peasants from the powerful, inherently malign and dangerous state (Chapter 4).

One implication of this perspective of the local understandings about the state is that, because tribal peasants want as little contact with the state as possible, the movement for an independent tribal state of Jharkhand was in fact organized and driven by a political elite as opposed to the tribal peasantry. In fact, in Tapu I never came across any tribal people who had been involved in the Jharkhand movement. Moreover, when I arrived in Tapu, a few days after Jharkhandi independence, most of the tribal peasants cared little about the formation of the new state - not, as Corbridge (2002) would suggest, because it was the result of political bargains between the BJP and the region's trading and manufacturing classes and outsiders, but because the very demand for a separate state of Jharkhand had never been a call of the tribal peasants.

In his excellent essay on Dumont's debt to Mauss, Parry argues that Dumont (1980) was inspired by Mauss' (1990 [1925]) enquiry into the way in which an originally unified conceptual order, where the overarching value was religious, came to be understood as separate domains such as religion, politics and economics. Traditional India, as Dumont (1980) saw it, was halfway along this path of development so that a politico-economic domain was separate from but still subordinate to the hierarchically superior realm of religion (Parry, 1998). The data presented in this thesis suggests that in Tapu there are both people who have a sacral polity model of the world, in which there is no separation of religion from politics, and people who have a world-view which is based on the Dumontian disjunction between religion and politics, or status and power. In this regard, this thesis suggests that in the tribal peasant world-view, in which all aspects of life should be legitimized by the spirits, there is no separation of the transcendent realm from politics. Indeed, the state is seen as alien and dangerous to tribal peasant society because it is outside of their sacral-polity model. At the same time, this thesis suggests that the *ex-zamindars* have moved (Chapter 2) from such a holistic model to one in which there is a disjunction between the realm of religion and the politico-economic domain. The modern state is accepted, in their world-view, as part of the realm of politics. Moreover,

they have a keen appreciation of the very intimate connections between politics and economics because they understand networks of political patronage to be the means towards prosperity.

Circumstances in modern India where there appears little acceptance of the separation of the realm of politics from the realm of the sacred, and hence little understanding of the ideas of the modern state, require explanation. In the Tapu area, as Kaviraj more recently proposes, 'the subtle threat to democracy might come from forces which wish to use the power of democracy in a way which keeps some sections of society permanently excluded' (2003: 1471). Rather than understand the marginalisation of the state as an inherent feature of tribal society, I have taken seriously Mitchell's proposition that 'we need to examine the detailed political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced' (1991: 78). The distinction between the state and society must be taken not as the boundary between two discrete entities, but as a line drawn internally *within* the social processes through which a social and political order is maintained (Mitchell, 1991: 85).

I have suggested that there is a political economy through which the tribal peasants' idea of the state as distinct from, and separate to, tribal society is reproduced. The local elite, whose lives and livelihoods are intimately entwined with the state, have vested interests in the state. They want to limit the number of people accessing the limited material resources of the state in order to better capture the assets for themselves. In part, the local elite's access to state resources is dependent on tribal peasants having no role in mediation with the state. To best ensure this is the case, the local elite does not publicly devalue tribal peasant beliefs but instead encourages tribal peasants to think of their own world as necessitating legitimation by the spirits. In perpetuating such ideas the local elite hopes that tribal peasants will continue to see the modern state as illegitimate and alien and, therefore, will endeavor to stay away from the practices of this 'malign' force. By doing this I have suggested that the local elite enhances the reproduction of the tribal peasant understandings of an opposition between state and society. And thus, I have suggested that the local elite is also encouraging the notion of tribal community as

traditional, harmonious, authentic, local and timeless. This is done, for example, by resurrecting the *parha*, through the *parha mela*, and depicting it as the essence that will protect tribal society from the malign state (Chapter 4).

In the move to participatory democratic decentralization, promoted by international development agencies, such as the World Bank, traditional institutions and communities have become understood as organizations through which development can be (best) focused (cf. Crook and Manor, 1998). In Ranchi, academics, activists and NGO workers are increasingly focused on campaigning to use 'traditional institutions' like the *parha* for development initiatives, as well as investigating their role in local self-governance (See PEARL reports). A Jharkhandi activist advising the MCC informed me that the MCC is also considering promoting traditional institutions of tribal self-rule like the *parha* as part of its Jharkhand campaign strategy. A point well made by both West and Kloeck-Jensen (1999) on traditional authority in Mozambique, and by Mosse (2001) on 'authentic local knowledge' in participatory techniques and on the recovery of lost tradition in tank irrigation in Tamil Nadu (Mosse, 1991), is that this 'authenticity' and 'tradition' necessarily reflect intra-community power relations. Moreover, as is clear in the case of the *parha* in the Tapu area, this 'traditional authority' is not so traditional at all, but bound up in the process of a local elite seeking to control and maintain their power and status.

Since differences in understandings of the state are explained by power-related constraints and not inherent cultural reasons, I have argued that if local power structures change, the holistic idea of the dangerous state held by the tribal peasants can also change (Chapter 3). Indeed, with Christianisation, education, and increasing opportunities in government jobs for many tribal peasants promoted by the Mandal Commission, increasing numbers of tribal peasants in rural Jharkhand are becoming part of the (new emerging) local elite. Indeed, these tribal people aspire to get government jobs and, if unsuccessful, set up small businesses and/or access illicit state resources.



It is members of this tribal elite, the tribal middle classes, who have long fought for a separate state of Jharkhand, one that will better serve the 'exploited' and 'suppressed' tribal people of the region. In Chapter 5, I argued that their vision of a better Jharkhand State also involves control of the seasonal casual labour migration of tribal peasants to the brick kilns in other states. I have suggested that this control really reflects two concerns. The first is that the migration of people choosing to leave the 'rich and glorious traditions' of tribal life in rural Jharkhand threaten this elite representation of the new state. The second is that the brick kilns are also a threat to the Jharkhandi elite's desire to generate aboriginal citizens who do not reproduce the old high caste representations of morally impure, drunken and sexually promiscuous tribals. As such, in Chapter 5, I argued that migration to the brick kilns cannot be understood simply in terms of economic compulsion. In fact, they also provide a space of social and cultural freedom from a more constrained village environment. Many of those who migrate to the kilns do so to escape temporarily from problems back at home, to explore a new country, to gain independence from their parents, or, most frequently, to live out prohibited amorous relationships.

The Jharkhandi elite's concerns for the poor tribal peasants are far removed from the desires of the tribal peasants themselves. However, in the form of the Maoist Communist Centre (the MCC), there has conventionally still been cause for hope for the well-wishers of Jharkhand's rural poor. These commentators often see the MCC as the 'party of the poor' that will protect and 'stand up for them against oppressive and exploitative forces, whether it be upper castes-classes or the state.' (Bhatia, 2000: 79). In Chapter 6, I have argued, however, that the MCC, supposedly anti-state, actually works through the local elite of politicians-contractors and is intimately connected with the state. I have argued that, as such, this marginalizes the tribal peasants. Moreover, I have suggested that in as far as the MCC imagines a better state for the tribal poor, it also envisages the production of better tribal social and sexual selves. The MCC is interested not only in controlling tribal sex but also in prohibiting tribals from drinking. In doing so the MCC is hoping to produce more disciplined, moral, and less primitive or *jungli* bodies. Like

that of the Jharkhandi activists, this MCC vision may only serve to further dominate and suppress the tribal peasants.

The significance of state visions at the local level needs to be explored from the wide canvas of social processes that are profoundly relevant to understandings of the state. Malinowskian empiricism is as essential as ever in deepening our understandings of social processes and I hope that this research is a testament to this fact. Local people's varied experiences from the Tapu area suggest that a study of the modern state in India needs to place at the centre of its exploration the way in which different people's interactions with the state depend on locally varied understandings of the state. Furthermore, Tapu people's experiences illuminate the need to explore the way in which reproduction, or change, in these understandings, affects processes of the state.

## Appendix A: A Matrix of Transaction in Food Boiled in Water in Tapu

		Gives to →											
1	Odhar	Rece- ives From ↓	1	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-
2	Yadav/Gop		+	2	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-
3	Gop		+	+	3	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-
4	Adhikari		-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	+	+	-
5	Pramanik		-	-	-	+	5	+	+	+	+	+	-
6	Munda		-	-	-	+	-	6	+	+	+	+	-
7	Oraon		-	-	-	+	-	+	7	+	+	+	-
8	Badaik		-	-	-	+	-	-	-	8	+	+	-
9	Lohra		-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	9	+	-
10	Maheli		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-
11	Muslim		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11

Some points to note on the above diagram:

- This is an adaption of Marriott's (1968) technique of matrix presentation. Each of the diagonal numbers refers to the corresponding caste listed at the left of the table. Each cell stands for a potential exchange between two castes. A plus indicates that an exchange takes place; a minus that there is no exchange.
- This is a diagram of '*kacchi*' (*nali*) – boiled food. It also applies to water and to rice beer (*hadia*) but not to distilled alcohol. I have not drawn a diagram of deep fried food ('*pukki*' or '*suji*') as in the past there was no wheat production in this area so the system of whether people ate each other's '*pukki*' *rasoi* rarely arose. Nowadays transactions of *pukki rasoi* are similar to that of *kacchi rasoi*, with some exception, such as the Pramaniks and Yadav/Odhar/Gop will eat each other's *pukki* food but will not touch each other's boiled food.
- Of the three castes at the top, the Odhars are the descendants of the male lineage of the *zamindars*, the Yadav-Gopes of Number 2 are descendants of the female lineages of the *zamindars* (hence they have lost their title Odhar), and the Gopes are descendants of the *servants* brought over as a milkman by the *zamindars*. To this extent there is a status hierarchy within the milkmen caste. The servant descendants go to many of the *adivasi* festivals and certainly to their marriages whereas the *zamindari* descendants do not. Thus here caste is dependent not just on rules of purity and pollution but also on status. Although they are descendants of the *zamindar* family, Adhikari food is not touched by those above

the Lohra caste because they are the product of an intercaste marriage with a Lohra (Lohra woman).

- Mundas consider themselves as superior to Oraons and it is said that a very long time ago they did not touch the food of Oraons. Mundas and Oraons themselves come above Badaiks, Lohras and Mahelis. They are considered superior to Scheduled Castes. The Badaiks of Boda are Chic-Badaiks who used to weave cloth. Although government classification states that they are Scheduled Tribe, in Boda they are certainly not regarded as a tribe but as a caste. The Badaiks are polluted because the cloth that they make is dipped in starch, the impure form of rice, and also because the thread used to weave cloth touches their mouths as a needle is threaded. Mahelis are the lowest.
- The above are *de jure* rules of the system but in practice many people do not follow them. In particular, they are rarely followed amongst unmarried men and women. People say that the system has become more flexible/lenient because mud cooking and eating vessels have been replaced by metal ones. The latter cannot remain polluted in the same way as mud ones. Mud vessels had to be broken as soon as an impure person touches them.

## **Appendix B: Notes on The Film, 'Heads and Tales'**

The idea to make the film, 'Heads and Tales', occurred rather spontaneously after 5 months in Tapu when I went to visit my supervisor, Professor Jonathan Parry, in Bhilai, Chattisgarh. One afternoon, as we were having a cup of tea, and discussing my work, Johnny asked me to tell him about one particular thing that really struck me about the village area. I had trouble deciding whether it was the chasing of elephants in the night, the attitudes of people that migrate to the brick kilns, or the ways in which traditional village heads are chosen (and so on). Suddenly, I remembered my experience of June 1999 of the Parha Mela, the so-called traditional tribal festival, which at this time seemed to me to be at the heart of the local people's varied experiences of the modern state. As I retold this account on that hot day in April 2002, we were sitting on the terrace of an organization called Jandarshan set up by Johnny's wife, Margaret Dickinson, an independent film maker. Jandarshan, a European Commission funded, not-for-profit organization, was in a two-year process of training 12 students of different caste and socio-economic backgrounds (most of who might not otherwise have had the opportunity) to make social documentary films. At the end of my account, Johnny commented that it all sounded visually spectacular. To that I had half-joked, 'Why don't we make a film?'

Margaret Dickinson made the film possible. Ajay T.G., Tejendra Tamrakar and Shobha Ajay arrived from Jandarshan on my door-step on May 27 2001 for an intensive session of shooting over twelve days. I hoped that it would be a learning experience for all. I was very interested in visual anthropology but felt that the film would be a supplement to my textual material and not in anyway a replacement. We edited the film while I was in the field. In its structure and presentation it thus does not benefit from the subsequent analysis of my fieldwork. The material in the film visualizes the Parha Mela and its politics that I present in Chapter 4. It presents the rich texture of the mela which is difficult to represent in text, and gives an account of a second mela that I was not able to attend. The film also provides insights into the topography and morphology of Tapu and the social structure of the Bero area.

Tejendra and I screened the film in Ranchi, Bero and Tapu. In Ranchi, it received a mainly academic, social activist and journalist audience. The discussion was rich in debate about 'authentic' tribal tradition, the 'intrusion' of politics, modernity and so on. In Bero, the film was mainly viewed by members of the political elite. At the end of that session many members of the audience such as Vishwanath Bhagat (the ex-MLA), Akshay Roy (his right-hand man, Khand Oraon (now involved with the MCC) stood up and made elaborate speeches about how their particular perspective was right and how the opposition was wrong. They criticized the film for being too short and not providing a complete history of the Parha Mela, which told its 'true' story. In Tapu, we screened it in the Munda courtyard where I lived on a TV run off two large car batteries that I had brought from Bero. More than 300 people from mainly the tribal peasant houses turned up. For many people it was the first time they had seen a colour TV and, more importantly, that they had seen places and people they recognized on the screen. My impression was they were far more interested in seeing the additional footage of themselves than in listening to the interviews of the ex-MLAs, that are central to the film, and found that content rather boring - as I suspect they may feel about the content of this thesis!

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## Newspapers

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