

### 3 Myth as history

## The representation of self-landscape in Adivasi creation myths

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This chapter unfolds how the creation myth, as preserved in Adivasi collective memory, depicts their consciousness of self and distinct way of life as it fructified around the space they inhabited.<sup>1</sup> I argue that 'their mytho-religious or cosmological construction' of the interrelationship between self and environment was shaped by the historical context of the communities under review. Since communities were in different stages of development, mythic imagery of self-landscape was community-specific with a pronounced difference in the nature of representation.

However, invocation of myth as history to unfold this imagery is problematic. Because of its theocratic and achronological character, myth is not considered as an 'irrefutable' and 'objective' source<sup>2</sup> by conventional historians (Collingwood 1985: 15). In fact, they are critical about the unstableness of collective memory itself due to its constructive and presentist nature (Halbwachs 1992: 40). Ascribing this apathy to latent ethnocentrism, Rappaport argues that the Euro-American vision of history considers their 'own construction of the past as "history" while alien modes are called "myth"' (1998: 12). However, Malinowski, Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes and Jan Vansina emphasise the immense epistemological potential of myth. Levi Strauss avers that being 'culturally selected narratives' this is understood to reveal the workings of the human mind.<sup>3</sup>

The author argues that for the Adivasis, myth is not simply a fictive narrative but a site where they record their past.<sup>4</sup> Verrier Elwin observed that myths 'are passed down from shaman to shaman as a kind of traditional wisdom or history' (1968: XXI-II). However, past thus enshrined is not a categorical and clear citation like other historical sources because 'these accounts are mostly images of the past and not *from* the past' (Rappaport 1998: 10). Rappaport considers this a distinctive feature of non-western historical consciousness

(ibid.: 10–11). Furthermore, he observes: 'In the Andean vision of the past, history is *in front of* the observer and moves *backward* toward the observer . . . This spatio-temporal sense of history contrasts with our own, in which the past is located *behind* the observer and historical process moves *forward*, always remaining behind our backs' (1994: 51–2). Accordingly, meaning 'is not found at the level of the surface phenomena' (Wadley 1986: 218). Therefore, oral tradition, nay myth, has to be decoded to apprehend the latent enduring and 'cumulative' element in it (Halbwachs 1992: 30). Gyan Prakash significantly observes that 'even as the past is constantly reinterpreted by the oral traditions, it is done by referring to certain constant elements' (1990a: 36). I locate this in the depiction of ethnic identity and landscape of a group at a given point of time and space. This is done in two ways. First by relating the origin of the ethnic and other people, it seeks to justify the bases of existing society. This reflects the 'social process out of which selves arise and within which further differentiation, further evolution, further organization, take place' (Mead 1934: 164). This way, myth tends to embody 'a social charter', as Malinowski puts it, rather than becoming a fictive and untrue account (cited in Gluckman 1965a: 26). This underlines Adivasi communities as agents who were active in enacting the social process of self-fashioning. But there is also an oblique reference to the surrender of agency in the mythic story of fall, either in the past or at a recent time, perhaps deployed as a revivalist strategy as we notice in the Kherwar and Birsite movements (MacDougall 1985; Singh 2002).

We have voluminous studies on the myths of middle India and North-East Frontier by Verrier Elwin (1949; 1968). In Jharkhand, we come across Munda and Santal myths in general sociological and anthropological accounts (Van Exem 1982). But for two recent essays (Hebbar 2003b: 40–9; P. Sen 2006b), Ho mythology has been ignored by scholars. Of these two, the first takes up Ho origin myth, as narrated ritually during *Maghe parab* by Ho villagers, to construct their relationship with the supernatural and natural worlds. While in the broader context of the Adivasis of Jharkhand, the second seeks to understand Ho notion of cosmology, as formulated in their creation myths.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section seeks to understand how different Adivasi legends are structured. The second outlines their content and significance. The last portrays the imagery of self-landscape under four subsections: the social environment, fashioning of self, representation of the other and portrayal of landscape.

### Structure of Adivasi myths

There are different versions of Adivasi creation legends in India. Elwin attributes this variation to the divergence of ideas and to the fact that there was 'no fixed deposit of doctrine, no sacred book to carry traditions from one generation to another' (1968: IX). He collected these legends from local informants who 'told their stories and interpreted them' (ibid.: X). However, in Jharkhand, mainly colonial-day officials and Christian missionaries were instrumental in appropriating these oral traditions from the native informants and textualising them in their ethnographies. To illustrate, S.R. Tickell derived the Ho myth (1840b: 797-9) from a few knowledgeable Mankis, shortly after the formation of the Kolhan Government Estate in 1837. This was partially reproduced a few decades later by Dalton (1973: 185). Hebbar and Purti have produced two recent versions, which are the products of their field-work and interaction with the community (2003b; Purti 1982).

Different versions of the Santal myths were recorded by W.W. Hunter and Rev. L.O. Skrefsurd. Hunter recorded his commentary of the myth under the head of Santal traditions in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*, followed by a literal translation of the legend of creation in its appendix (1975: 147-56, 450-3). Skrefsrud's version was reproduced in *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*, which was originally written in Santali language in 1871 and translated and published in English in 1887. The 'original work', recorded by Skrefsurd, 'was taken down from the mouth of an old guru, named Kolean'. This included minor additions from another source (Bodding 1994: 1). Reference to Santal myth of genesis, as narrated by another native informant, was reproduced in Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*.<sup>5</sup>

The Munda myth was collated and published by Fr. Hoffmann with financial support from the government in 1924 (1998: IX-XV). During his long stay in Chota Nagpur, Mennas Orea, Rufus Horo, Sahdeo Chutia Purti and some fellow missionaries helped him not only in recording the myth, but also details about the Munda language and culture. On this basis, he could produce his 16-volume magnum opus, the *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*. About the need and impact of native information, he acknowledged:

convinced that the Aryans are mainly answerable for the impending extinction of the Munda race. . . . it (It) is therefore a duty incumbent on our race, that some member of it should try to give as faithful picture of that civilization as possible, and thereby keep alive at least the memory of that, which has been so ruthlessly and

...ally as I am able.  
(ibid.)

Therefore, though the creation legends were reproduced by the colonial officials and missionaries, the basic information came from Adivasi informants. These collections have two distinct features. Though more or less rooted in time, to some extent these covered a long stretch of time between the creation of first man and first woman in primordial time and the eve of British rule. Second, the content of recording was often influenced by the social context of the collector and recorder, that is, whether he was a colonial official or a missionary. Since both the Ho myths were collected by administrative officials for writing ethnographies, the occasion was secular. Perhaps, this was why instead of elaborating the creation of the world, flora and fauna by *Singbonga*, the focus was on social environment. Seemingly, this was the precise term of reference set for the Mankis by Tickell. Same is true about the recordings of Santal myth by Dalton and Hunter. The former merely noted the human origin from two eggs, and then elaborated the story of Santal habitations and their migrations (1973: 209–11). Hunter produced a faithful translated version of Santal traditions that contained a brief narration of the formation of the earth, creation of the first human pair, supply of garments to them, preparation and drinking of the intoxicating liquor that procreated the human race and their dispersion. Though all these were done supposedly at the behest of the *Marang Buru* (Great Mountain), the focus again was on the human elements (1975: 450–3).

However, the sacred and creational stages figured more prominently when missionaries like Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud or Fr. Hoffmann reproduced tribal myths. The former graphically narrated different stages of the creation of the earth and man as instrumented by *Thakur*. The sacred aspect, therefore, was in greater focus than the profane aspect like dispersion and migration (Bodding 1994: 14–22). The Munda myth by Hoffmann is entirely about the creation of the earth, the origin of man, the making of the first plough, the division of time into day and night and separately about the destruction of man by a rain of fire. The entire legend of creation highlighted the role of *Singbonga/Haram* as embodiments of the religious beliefs of the Mundas (Hoffmann and Melen Vol. XIII 1998: 3981–8, 3919–21).

Adivasi genesis legends in India vary in size and content (Elwin 1968). To illustrate from Jharkhand, Ho myth is very cryptic and small as

compared with Munda, Santal and Oraon myths. While two versions of Santal myth contain 20 pages (Bodding 1994: 3-22) and Munda and Oraon myths 8 pages each (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. XIII 1998: 3981-8; Roy 1984: 265-72),<sup>6</sup> but that of the Ho covers a little more than two pages only. With differences in details, the rest show a thematic resemblance, possibly because of their origin from the same Kolarian stock (except Oraon).

### Creation legends – content and significance

Creation myths depict distinctive beliefs among the Indian Adivasis in the creation of the world (Elwin 1968: 3). Their cosmological notions reveal an early attempt at comprehending and explaining the lived world (P. Sen 2006b: 310-20). In a pre-scientific community, this understanding was obviously saturated with a theocratic rather than rational explanation of creation. But Elwin avers that this had a vital functional role in Adivasi life, also. Contextualising the Baigas of middle India, he observes 'the mythology of the Baiga is the central power-house of the life and energy of the tribe . . . Myth does far more than explain the Baiga's institutions; it is their motive power and their authorization' (2002: 305). Creation myth of Indian Adivasis, on the whole, manifests varying impacts of Hindu and Christian traditions (ibid.: 306-7). Among the Adivasis of North-East India, the impact of *Ramayana* and *Jataka* tales, signifying Buddhist influence, is very profound (Elwin 1968: XXI).

This study on content of the Adivasi creation legends has been divided into two parts for the convenience of analysis. The first part forms their cosmological understanding, while the second deals with their notion of time, space and demography. These myths narrate the story of how Haram or Singbonga and Thakur, their highest deity, created the earth, plants, human beings and animals in order to forge a symbiotic relation between the spirits, man and nature. Despite the broad unity in the divine creation of cosmology, we notice a difference among them about the precise order of creation. The Munda legend narrates that dry land and animals were created first. After that, a giant stork laid two eggs out of which emerged a boy and a girl. Since they lived like brother and sister, in order to multiply creation, Haram taught them to prepare *hanria* (rice beer). After they drank rice beer, the procreation of human race started (Hoffmann and Emelem Vol. XIII 1998: 3981-8). According to the Ho myth, Singbonga created the earth first. He then made grass, tree, rock, water, cattle and all the wild animals. The last to have originated was a pair of boy and girl. After

they came of age, Singbonga taught them the art of making *eely* (rice beer) so that they could procreate (Tickell 1840b: 797).

In the Santal creation myth, *Thakur-Jiu* first made the beings who lived in water. Next, He created two clay models, and before He could infuse life into them, they were broken into pieces by the Day-horse (a mythic horse). *Thakur* then made *Has* and *Hasil* (a pair of swans) out of the material from His breast and breathed life into them, after which they flew up. But since there was water all around, they were forced to land on *Thakur's* hand. After He asked the swans to descend on the froth produced by the Day-horse, He created the alligator, the prawn, the boarfish, tortoise, the stone crab and the earthworm. Next, *Thakur* employed these creatures to collect soil from the water. But only the earthworm and tortoise could fetch enough to form the earth mass. He then got the heaped soil to be levelled with a harrow. After the creation of the earth, *Thakur* made mountains, vegetation, plants, trees and finally the human beings. *Has* and *Hasil* laid two eggs, from which a boy named *Haram* or *Pilcu Haram* and a girl named *Ayo* or *Pilcu Budhi* emerged. At *Thakur's* behest, the boy and girl were moved by the swans to a place named *Hihiri Pipiri*. Here, the early pair drank rice beer, which *Lita* or *Marang Buru*, the principal god of the Santals, had taught them to prepare. This set the process of the origin of universal mankind, followed by the creation of different septs (Bodding 1994: 3–7). However, the Oraon myth is characterised by an absence of the creation of earth and living beings – their myth relates the story of the division of time into day and night, today and tomorrow (Roy 1984: 267).

Adivasi mythology also variably narrates community-specific stories of the dissolution and subsequent creation of mankind by their Supreme Beings. According to the Santal myth, as degeneration had set among human beings and they did not respond to His behest of correcting themselves, the irate *Thakur* set in a rain of fire (arguably water) for seven days. After the rain of fire caused the dissolution of all human beings and animals, He got the world peopled again through *Pilcu Haram* and *Pilcu Budhi* or some other holy pair (Bodding 1994: 8–9). The Ho story of dissolution is somewhat different. As humankind had become incestuous and disrespectful to God or their superiors, He instrumented the destruction of all except 16 human beings with water (some say with fire). With the surviving 16 people, He conducted the multiplication of the human race (Tickell 1840b: 798). The Munda story is, to a great extent, similar to the Ho story. It narrates the destruction of the human race with a rain of fire by *Singbonga*. Though the reason is not explicitly stated, we can presume that it was similar to the one in Ho myth. But, there are differences. First,

the Supreme Being is addressed as grandfather here and the children as grandchildren. Second, rain of fire destroyed all except a brother and sister whom *Nageora* (Nage spirit) hid in the cool water in a hollow made by a crab. The process of procreation is the same, except that a sick child was born to the primeval couple. He asked them to sacrifice a white fowl to Him to cure the child and taught them the rituals. Through this pair, the race of *Horoko* (Mundas) originated (Hoffmann and Emelem 1998: 3919–21). However, the Oraon myth is slightly different. Here, *Parvati*, instead of *Nage-era*, put a man and a woman in a crab hole when a rain of fire had set in the process of annihilation. When *Dharmes* arrived on the scene, he took care of them, taught them the technique of cultivation and asked them to perform *dandakatta* and *bhelwa* ceremonies and to sacrifice an egg in His name. Thereafter, the multiplication of mankind restarted.<sup>7</sup>

The Adivasi perception of cosmology has some broad features. First, this earth and its flora and fauna is divine creation, and god is the *causa sui* Supreme Creator. Second, the perpetuation of this order is a moral act and its violation punitive (P. Sen 2006b: 310). Third, the participation of different biotic objects in creation, as also the divine making of the biotic ambience, keeps reminding them that like the human beings, they are equally vital for the survival both of the world and living elements. We can draw a parallel from an indigenous community in Australia known as *Bininj*. These people defined their relationship with the faunal world, more precisely fish, by not treating them merely as an item of food, but as 'part of a wider system of interconnected socio-physical relationship and identity'. We can only say that 'assumptions and beliefs about the world and their relationships to it' are products of the socialising technique of a community (Head, Trigger and Mulcock 2005: 257).

The cosmological reading provides us the decisive clue to the moral basis of Adivasi culture. Now, the question is how is this relevant to this study? The sharing of a common culture is generally given central importance in the formation of ethnic boundaries, though there is a debate whether this should be deemed 'as a primary and definitional characteristic of ethnic group organization' (Barth 1966: 11). But, there should perhaps be no disagreement if we treat this as their earliest attempt to create the cultural boundary that sets up their notions of collective self and distinction from others. What is no less significant is that Adivasis consider self as a reproductive and not a 'once-and-for-all' idea. And so, through ritual maintenance and annual recreation, they enact the practice of 'continual expression and validation' of their identity (ibid.: 15). This process is conducted through the

ceremonial reproduction of the creation myth found among Indian indigenes (Elwin 2002: 306). Likewise, when the Adivasis of Bihar and Jharkhand annually recount their story of creation during Mage/Sohrai/Dandakata festivals, they seek to bind their members to their cultural roots (Hebbar 2003b: 46–8).

### Imagery of self and landscape

I invoke here the second part of the myth depicting the representation of time, space and demography to relate their notions of self and landscape, as also their sense of history. But I argue that this should not be deemed as an attempt to collapse memory into history. Rather, working within the distinction that Spiegel affirms between memory and history,<sup>8</sup> the author would like to identify and decode the 'images of the past', more so the events and conjunctures from Adivasi history, to formulate Adivasi notions of self and landscape. I refer to Elwin in support of my argument: about the Baigas, he wrote:

These myths then are no mere fairy stories, nor just primitive attempts to scientific explanation of things . . . To the Baiga they are the records of veritable happenings which set the social order on its course, instituted tribal law, and established him in his unique position as Bhumia Raja, lord of the earth.

(2002: 308)

The point I emphasise is that every society has its own sense of history and specific way of reproducing the same. Parker and Rathbone rightly maintain that the 'African peoples have long had their perception of the past and their own ways of remembering it' (2007: 3).

As I seek to apprehend the Adivasi sense of temporality, the question that comes to mind is whether their mythology reflects a sense of clock and calendrical time or whether their notion of time was different.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the Mundas had no knowledge of time or the sense of day and night, and so they worked without any rest. But Singbonga/Haram created night for taking rest and initiated them into the calendrical time of today and tomorrow (P. Sen 2006b: 315).<sup>10</sup> The Ho myth suggests that they had an understanding of the separation of day and night as represented by the sunrise, and they did know how the days were constituted into yesterday, today and tomorrow (Tickell 1840b: 797). But, did they have any sense of the longer variety of time? Adivasi mythology in Jharkhand is basically rooted in primordial or unidentified past, with suggestion of undated calendrical time. The Ho myth

narrates that the earth, wild animals and man had originated in primeval time (Tickell 1840b: 697–8). This implies that they understood that a long stretch of time, beginning with the origin of the world, is beyond human reckoning. But historic time is also metaphored when it refers to the English, *sati* and *charak puja* (ibid.: 698). With their root in primordial time, the Santals formulated the notion of dated time and time progression. This is depicted through the narration of their living in different places at different times up to the advent of the British (Bodding 1994: 3–22). The Munda and Oraon myths also imply temporal progression with the onset of agrarianism among the Mundas and Hinduisation among the Oraons.

### Self – the social environment

The study of the representation of self should begin with the portrayal of the social context, because drawing the socio-physical context through myth is an important strategy deployed by the Adivasis for identification and differentiation. Besides understanding its technology, it is essential for a student of history to apprehend the circumstance or period when this emerged. Even sociologists acknowledged its significance when they observed: 'Rather than assume that people contrast themselves with others, a more appropriate question is under what circumstances are people likely to contrast themselves with others and under what circumstances are they likely to include others in their self judgments' (Leary and Tangney 2012: 84).

Mythic profiling of demography by the Adivasis in India reinforces the inventive character of social environment. This begins with the emphasis on divinely created universalistic vision of mankind – the story of the creation of the first pair and later proliferation into different communities (Elwin 2002: 312–17) variously identified as tribes and castes. Elwin remarks that 'the various myths that compose the Baiga epic of creation' were 'the biographies of the parents of mankind'. They conceived of 'thirty six families of mankind' representing different tribes and caste groups as forming their social world (2002: 305). But in Jharkhand, we find an agreement among Adivasi communities about the universal vision of mankind. However, there is disagreement about the formation of races and communities. The Munda and Oraon myths remain silent about it, while those of the Santal and Ho are very eloquent. Hence, I shall dig deep into the Ho and Santal legends to understand how the notion of social ecology was constituted.

In the Ho legend, the process of multiplication of humankind began with the birth of 12 pairs of brothers and sisters from the primeval

pair. They were the grandchildren of Singbonga, implying that the first man and woman were his children. This familial connection envisioned the primal universalistic vision of world demography (Tickell 1840b: 798). But a change occurred in primeval time through divine mediation. Singbonga arranged a grand feast, after which tribes and castes like the Hos, Bhumij, Brahmins, Rajputs, Chattris, besides and castes other Hindus like the Ghasis, as also the Bhuiyans, Santals, Kurmis and finally the English originated (ibid.). It may be presumed that the unnamed Hindus also included the Goalas, Kamars, Kumars and Tantis who were allowed later by the Hos to inhabit their villages.<sup>11</sup> It seems that entry of these functional castes into the Ho myth dated back to the time when the majority of villages were founded in south Kolhan around the beginning of the 18th century AD.<sup>12</sup> However, one may contend (and rightly so) that this link may be predated by a few centuries when the Ho entered and lived in north Kolhan (ibid.: 696-7). The relation with the English began after the former entered the political scene during the early decades of the 19th century. One can discern that the Ho social ecology was constituted by ethnic and non-ethnic people including the English. A similar inclusive notion of social ecology may be discerned among the Baigas: their myth named Gond, 'all other tribes', Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Bania, Chamar, Dhamar, a fishing caste, Mahar, Musalmans, as also the English (Elwin 2002: 312-17). Delineation of the demographic ambience clearly suggests that this human geography had developed contrary to general belief before the onset of colonialism (Barth 1966: 17).

The Santal creation myth is richer and more particular in details about the constitution of social ecology and the nature of relationship among peoples. Like the Ho, the Santals also conceived of a universal human self out of which particularistic demography developed. Hunter merely noted the birth of seven sons and seven daughters from the original pair, followed by the creation of seven septs (*killis*) and the multiplication of the humankind. But their specific identities have not been revealed (1975: 452-3). However, Skrefsrud who was more informed narrated that after the first pair gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters, they were divided into seven Santal septs and Haram made their social norms. So, according to the Santal myth, they formed the primeval mankind. But when people 'became very bad', Haram destroyed human race. When the world was peopled again (Bodding 1994: 7-8), mankind was divided into 'tribes'. This is the first suggestion of the division of human race into separate but undefined ethnicities. But who these communities were has not been identified. At this stage, five more Santal septs were added (ibid.: 7-10).

Till then, the Santals were identified as the Kharwar. We can presume that the legend related to that phase of Santal past when they were living an insulated life devoid of contact with others. Later, they came into contact with the Dekos ('non-Santals of the better class, especially Hindus'). This signified the entry of non-Adivasis into the Santal social orbit. But significantly, Santal or Kharwar was an inclusive, rather generic, demography, which included the Mundas, Birhors and Kurmbis, as also unnamed others (*ibid.*: 12). This generic ethnic conglomeration was later divided into distinct ethnic communities and assigned to different factors: Birhors were ousted from the Kharwar fold because they 'ate Hanuman monkeys'; Mundas deliberately 'separated themselves'; Kurmbis 'gradually became somewhat like Dekos' (*ibid.*). Besides the Kurmbis, a few Kharwars and Birhors became Singhs through marriage (*ibid.*: 12).

Other Santal Gurus narrated their version of myth: after the creation of septs and to check flouting of endogamic norms, each sept was divided into 12 sub-septs at the behest of Thakur. But when mankind had become numerous, He arranged a feast so that 'they may live well and not be exterminated from the earth'. He got them to cook 'all kinds of flesh, viz., ox-meat, buffalo-meat, the flesh of goats and sheep, of fowls and pigs, of fish and camels' which were then arranged in 12 leaf cups. Next, he asked 'one principal man among each of the original septs' to look at the leaf cups, to move to 'the length of three or four plough-furrows' and to run to pick up their own leaf cups. The person reaching first took the leaf cup containing ox meat. His progenies became the Santals. But those who took the flesh of goats, sheep and fish became Dekos (*ibid.*: 19). This suggests that, at that stage, the Santal social environment was composed only of two groups, the Santals and Dekos. However, the Santals represented an inclusive community comprising low-caste Hindus like the Doms, Kamars, Bhuyas, Tilis, Hadis, Bauris, Kunkals and unnamed others. Obviously, they were those 'known to the Santals' (*ibid.*: 20-1), rather neighbourly groups of people with whom they had good relationship. There was yet another reason to which I shall return later. This study seeks to explore and examine how the self and the relationship with others were enumerated.

### Fashioning of self

Adivasi mythic self-fashioning has some broad features. First, these are considerably variable and not uniform due to their different historical contexts. Second, while drawing ethnic boundaries to underline their

independent identities, their understanding of selfhood was saturated by 'the awareness that . . . inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to "significant others"' (Cerulo 1997: 597) and the physical landscape. Self, therefore, is not a changeless and uniform idea. We begin this section with the Ho.

The Ho belonged to the Munda stock of the Kolarian group who inhabited the Chota Nagpur plateau. Sometime around the 10th century AD, a few of them migrated to Singhbhum (Tuckey 1920: 41). Over time, they developed the same linguistic derivation of the Ho language and culture, which crystallised into distinct Honess. This was metaphorically expressed in their being born from the first pair, who chose buffalo's and bullock's flesh. Moreover, their advent as Ho implied rejection of their link with the parent stock. To incorporate this important experience of the community, the original Munda myth was reconstructed. Hence, the close resemblance between the Munda and first five paragraphs of Ho myth; the sixth recorded that the people lived separately, multiplied and evolved their languages and cultures (Tickell 1840b: 798). Besides distinctiveness, the Ho asserted that being born of the first pair they were Singbonga's most favoured progenies. This strategy affirmed 'the process of differentiation' and more so the tendency to 'maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group' (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 170). This assertion of superiority was based on their historic success in carving out an exclusive political space in Singhbhum, which they called Hodesum (*ibid.*). This conjuncture presumably belonged to a period between the 12th century and the 18th century when the Hos expanded and colonised large territories in Singhbhum. The myth also conveys another message: the higher position accorded to the flesh eaters in the mythic feast (*ibid.*) implies that the Ho rated animal flesh higher to agricultural products. Moreover, the legend of the creation of plough found in Munda myth (Hoffmann and Emelen, Vol. XIII 1998: 3984-5) does not figure in Ho myth. These showed that the Ho located themselves at a pastoral and food-gathering stage, where hunting and animal husbandry occupied a higher position than agriculture. I presume that at the time of the recording of the myth (1840), due to differential growth of agriculture in Kolhan, the link with forest was still central. Hence, they preferred to highlight their pre-peasant forest-centric status to distinguish themselves from the peasant societies of the caste people around. As against this, cultural change as a means of fashioning self is different in subsequent myths. Here, centrality of agriculture in Ho socio-economy is expressed through the invocation of agricultural symbols and the use

of rice during the ritual (Hebbar 2003: 43, 47). The version of myth recorded by Purti presents the Ho as a more complete peasant (Purti 1982: 7, 10–11). Significantly, what stands highlighted is the theme of self-refashioning, rather the dialectics of being and becoming in the Ho myths.

Another modification, that is, change from agency to servitude, needs to be elaborated: the former is suggested when the Ho was engaged in the act of political expansion and colonisation, but the latter had set in with the advent of the English around Singhbhum during the second part of the 18th century, ending in the subjugation of Hodesum to the British in 1837. A significant fact is that instead of contesting, they were trying to rationalise subjugation. Before expounding on the logistics it will be pertinent to point to a wide tendency prevailing among other indigenous communities in India to rationalise political subjugation. This was done in a couple of ways, as we engage with the Baiga mythology. First, their legend portrayed that Muslims, English and the tribes, other than Gond, were born together, implying thereby that they came not under others but under one of their kin. Second, they projected subjugation as a divine ordination. They, therefore, conceived that Bhagwan convened a congregation of people to make a king for them; He arranged gold, silver and wooden chairs for them – the Muslims and English occupied the golden chair, the Hindus were offered the silver and the Gond the wooden one. But Nanga Baiga, the primeval man of their community, 'squatted down on the floor' (Elwin 2002: 317). The same mentality may be discerned in Jharkhand. The Ho myth records: 'And after this from the Koles, from their senior house sprung the English, who also ate of bullock's flesh. But they are the senior children, and the Koles the junior!' (Tickell 1840b: 798). The sharing of the food and acceptance of a junior position to the British reflected the Ho defeat at British hands in 1836–37. Another point of view is that the abdication of the first place to the British, expressive of mythic acceptance of subjugation and defeat, was mellowed down by the wilful sharing of food. Moreover, the avowed commonness between Ho and British origins perhaps implied that they were defeated not by the other but by one of their own, rather they deliberately accepted British rule. This rationalisation indicates the hegemonisation of a section of Ho leadership who narrated the myth to the British official. The fact yet remains that a phase of anti-British uprising began during 1857–59 when the community challenged British rule. Even then, the myth was not reconstructed at that time (Dalton 1973: 185). This serves the other purpose of comprehending the Ho consciousness of history, and reveals that the oral construction/

reconstruction of the past is not conditioned by the autonomy of the past per se but by the imperative of the present.

The Santal self-fashioning through the entire complex of genesis myth is also distinct, yet different, in some respects. Kolean's story particularly highlighted their Kherwar but not Santal identity. The legend narrates the story of migration, territorial expansion and their systematic marginalisation. To this, the version narrated by other Gurus added the story of the origin of the Kharwars and Dekos from the feast. Yet, the implied images portray an oblique recognition of Santal selfhood. This focussed more on becoming rather than any fixed or essential self-image. It begins with the story of procreation from the original couple. To multiply his creation, Thakur or Lita took them to the forest to collect the roots from which Pilcu Buri prepared the rice beer. This was followed by the birth of seven boys and seven girls. After they came of age, Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Buri taught the boys hunting and the girls' techniques of gathering vegetables and leaves for their homes. It signifies that originally the Santals were at a hunting and gathering stage, but learnt to build their homes, sing and dance, develop the institution of marriage as well as sept norms and procreate as per Thakur's design only later (Bodding 1994: 7). But they had then been a migratory race, engaged in searching new habitat to accommodate excess population. Implicit in this story of dispersion (*ibid.*: 8-9) is the emergence of subjecthood, their subordination and finally their systematic relegation to the margin by the Hindus and Muslims.

### Representation of the other

The representation of the other means how interethnic and inter-community relations were constructed by the Adivasis. In Ho and Santal legends, the notion of the other is associated with the movement from primordial unity to diversity in mankind. The original Ho notion was that all, being the progenies of primeval 12 brothers and sisters, coexisted by wilfully sharing food and not interfering into other's domain ('none shall touch his brother's share'). But later these brothers lived separately in their chosen places and evolved their distinct demographic identities. The Ho mentality to others was coded in the hierarchic order of creation of both the tribe and caste.<sup>13</sup>

We visualise a pronounced aversion particularly to the upper castes among the Hos. So, the Brahmins were said to be born of the third pair, Rajputs, Chatris and other Hindus of subsequent pairs. Second, they were denied the highest food of buffalo and bullock's meat. These meant that Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who held first and second ranks in the caste hierarchy, were considered lower than that of the Ho and

Bhumij (Tickell 1840b: 798). This metaphorically expressed their rejection of caste hierarchy itself, rather of their Hinduness. We notice this in the Baiga myth also, where the Brahmins were assigned second rank after the Gond. Moreover, they were bracketed with the Chamars (Elwin 2002: 317). Last, inferiority of the Hindus was further expressed by the Hos through the mythic denunciation of social practices like *sati* and *charak puja* (Tickell 1840b: 798–9). Similarly, the Baiga creation myth also sets up the idea of hierarchy: the first to be born were the Gonds; followed by the Chamar and Brahmin castes together; then came the Musalmans and English together and all the other ethnic groups; and last were the *Pankas* or village watchmen (Elwin 2002: 317). Possibly, the bias against Hindus among Jharkhandi Adivasis had originated due to Hindu expansion in the Chota Nagpur plateau, which forced the exodus of a section of the Mundas. So, they not only prevented Brahmins, Rajputs and Muslims to enter or settle in their territory, but also caused physical harm to them.<sup>14</sup> Of the tribes, the Bhumijis were called *Matkum*, that is, next in brotherhood. This affirms a familial relation. The Bhuiyans were the next. Their lower rank showed their marginalisation in Ho mental world, a reflection of their defeat at the hands of the Ho during the power struggle for territorial control in an unidentified past (Tickell 1840b: 696–7). The Santal came next. Their relegation related their political insignificance due to their numerical smallness in Kolhan.

The Santal representation of the other, rather their interethnic-community relation, was based on the notions of assimilation and dichotomy. It reflects that like the Hos, the Santals were also 'sensitive to meaningful features of their immediate environment' that motivated them to 'adjust their thinking and doing to what seems contextually relevant' and finally motivated them 'to incorporate others into identity' (Leary and Tangney 2012: 84–5). Assimilation was formulated at two distinct levels. First, it was done by focussing on the notion of initial universal selfhood and basic unity and solidarity of mankind and second, by underlining the solidarity of the marginals and dominated. Hence, their myth invented the idea of unity of the Santals, Mundas, Birhor, Kurmbis and others, who were believed to have once belonged to the same Kherwar stock (Bodding 1994: 12). Likewise, the legend also projected the idea of racial oneness with such castes as Doms, Kamars, Tilis, Hadis, Bauris, Kunkals and unnamed others (ibid.: 20–1).

The central theme of the myth, however, is the portrayal of the dichotomy between the Santals and Hindus/Muslims. This was conceived through the division of mankind into the broad ethnic category called Santal/Kharwar and non-ethnic groups or Dekos, the division enacted

as part of divine design through the metaphor of selection of different shares of food by these groups of people (ibid.: 19). However, their myth portrays the changing nature of this relationship – they were friends initially. This was why ‘all Kharwar people’ accompanied Ram Raja to Ceylon and helped him defeat Ravan (ibid.: 10). Their relations were later soiled. Gradually, antagonism towards Dekos grew, which could be assigned to the cultural and political expansion of the Hindus and Muslims (ibid.: 12–14, 20). This could be the origin of the idea of Deko or ethnic outsiders as tormentors and oppressors, as witnessed even today. The Santals projected a low profile of the upper castes to give vent to their strong aversion to Brahmanic rather than folk Hinduism. The former were believed to be the torchbearers of Hindu cultural hegemony who not only disrupted the greater Kharwar solidarity, but also defiled the core Kharwar self through ‘illicit intercourse’ and marriage (ibid.: 12). Cultural fissure became political when the internal clash between the Kiskus (called *rapaj*, i.e. kings) and Marandis (*kipisar* or collection of wealthy people), two Santal septs, encouraged the Dekos to enter and rob the people, defeat the opposing Murmus (Thakur or priests), another Santal sept and finally occupy ‘the whole country’. This caused a fresh wave of Santal migration and Dekoisation of the remainder (ibid.: 20). This was the historical backdrop that created the essential dialectical relations between the dominant and dominated and conduct the polarisation of the marginals against the dominant Dekos.

The Santal myth does not attempt to underplay the reality of subjection. As mentioned earlier, subjection was both defined and reasoned in terms of cultural and political subjugation under the Hindus. This bred anger and hate, which prompted them to liken the Hindus as detestable thorns (Sinha, Sen and Panchabhai 1969: 127). This phase was followed by the expansion of the Muslims; there is no clear admission of their being politically conquered. Rather, the narration of their displacement and flight obliquely referred to their earlier habitats being run over by the enemies, leading finally to confinement of the Santals to the east of Ajay River. The British conquest was covertly admitted by referring to the Santal Insurrection against the British. But this was somewhat toned down when they were referred as a bulwark against the Santal attempt ‘to make the Ganges our boundary’ by driving out the Dekos (Bodding 1994: 10–11).

### Portrayal of landscape

While the narration of self is the central theme of the legend of creation, reference to landscape is peripheral and community specific. According

to Adivasi creation myths, the concept of the world, interchangeably space and landscape also, is both metaphysical and physical, comprising the pure and eternal primordial world, the visible empirical world and an invisible world of spirits, coexistent with the empirical world (P. Sen 2006b: 314). But besides this universalistic notion, they showed an inchoate tendency to refer to geocentric, that is, physical or territorial, space represented by the valleys, hills and forests they occupied. Though they were not conversant with the scientific and philosophical notion of space or the empirical and lived world, they 'had the awareness of the concept of extension in one or more dimensions, distance, directions and emptiness' (ibid.: 315).

The creation stories of the Munda, Oraon and Ho do not have much to offer as to how they defined the landscape and shaped their understanding of the interrelationship between self and landscape. The Mundas referred to the earth as the locus of all vegetation, human beings and animals. This does not relate the story of how earth was subsequently divided into territories inhabited by the Mundas and other communities. Significantly, the legend of the 'making of the first plough' symbolises the advent of agriculture and conversion of the original wilderness into cultural landscape (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. XIII 1998: 3981-5).

However, in the Oraon legend, we do not find the crystallisation of the concept in its full dimensions. It merely relates the genesis of mankind, the institution of agriculture, discovery of iron and the origin of the gods and spirits (Roy 1984: 251-72). It is silent on the territorialisation of the landscape, putting more emphasis on the conversion of the physical landscape into a cultural one, where humankind pursued agriculture and iron smelting technology.

As we engage with the Hos, first we find the conception of earth comprising land mass, water, flora, fauna and human beings. Second, there is the primal universalistic vision of demography and space who lived together as there was no distinction of race, caste, language and geography (Tickell 1840b: 798). Third, the division of primal mankind into castes, tribes and races also accepted the idea of living separately in their territories, comprising near and 'far countries' (ibid.). This is the backdrop in which the Hos, the first in the divine scheme of creation, seemed to have inhabited on a territory, which as Tickell informed, they called Hodesum. However, the myth merely gives an oblique hint to the nature of the landscape. The metaphor of the primacy of animal flesh locates them as a hunter-forager, and therefore their landscape as a natural space full of forests and animals. But the version of myth, as recorded by Purti, reveals the consolidation

of cultivation and their peasantry, implying thereby the change of their wild landscape into a cultural one. We, however, find a different vision of landscape among the Santals.

As mentioned earlier, they conceptualised landscape originally as one and unbounded space from which the suggestion of the creation of the community-specific areas may be apprehended. But their legend is very certain and eloquent about place-specific changing Santal selfhood. According to their myth, it was at their original but unnamed home that the original pair had given birth to seven sons and seven daughters (Hunter 1975: 452-3). When after re-peopling, mankind multiplied, they moved to a 'very large plain' named *Sasanbead* (Bodding 1994: 7-10). When human race was divided into tribes and their number grew, they had to make several change of places through migrations. Finally, they arrived at Champa (ibid.: 7-10). As territory/region/place, landscape came under focus again with the affirmation of their Santal linguistic identity. This crystallised when they moved from Cae to Jarpi and then to Cae Campa, where the Santals finally attained full selfhood with the strengthening of their settled village system and socio-economic fabric (ibid.: 20). The occupation of the undefined 'whole country' by the Hindus, the confinement of the Santals to the east of Ajay River after Muslim expansion and 'to make the Ganges our (Santal) boundary' were other territorial expressions (ibid.: 10-11, 20). Differentiating people locationally was another way to forge self-landscape affinity. To exemplify, the Dekos were defined as the 'non-Santals of the better class, especially Hindus' who 'were living in the plains' as against the Santals who lived 'in the forests and on the hills' (ibid.: 10).

The Adivasi creation legends thus produce the early imagery of self and landscape which broadly set the parameters of this linkage. We now move from myth to more material and substantial terrain of history to understand how the notions of self and landscape changed over time and how the Adivasis negotiated with these. But before entering the core part of this study, I would like to underline that of the three elements of landscape, that is, land, water and forest, the first has been studied in its three variants – land as territory where the Adivasis built their homeland; the village spaces on which they constructed their huts for living; and land comprising the area under plough that sustained them. This close linkage with land, water and forest as well as institutions of social governance of the landscape forms the subject of the following chapters, beginning with the affinity between identity and territory.

## Notes

- 1 Earlier version of the chapter were presented at the Research Colloquium, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics on 28 October 2004 and published in Saikia 2008: 12–16.
- 2 Underlining this bias, Heehs writes: 'Myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation' (1994: 1–19).
- 3 Levi Strauss affirms that 'myths signify the mind that evolves them by making use of the world of which it is a part' (Sturrock 1979: 34, 41).
- 4 I am inspired by Barthes, who observes: 'As a total of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth has its own value, it belongs to a history' (1973: 126–7).
- 5 This is Bagh Rai's narrative of 'the history of his race from the creation to the establishment of British rule' (Dalton 1973: 209–11).
- 6 However, the volume of Munda legend increases if we add the legend of Rain of fire (Hoffmann and Emelen Vol. XIII 1998: 3919–21).
- 7 *Danda-katta* and *Bhelwa* are performed to save men, specially children, cattle and crops from the evil eye and evil mouth (Roy 1984: 251, 266–9).
- 8 'Memory "resurrects", "re-cycles", and makes the past "reappear" and live again in the present, it cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of history' (Spiegel 2002: 149–62).
- 9 For concept of time among the Adivasis of Jharkhand, see P. Sen (2006b).
- 10 For a detailed version of the myth, see Hoffmann and Emelem, Vol. XIII, 1998: 3985–8.
- 11 E. Roughsedge to C. T. Metcalfe, Secretary to the Government, 9 May 1820, para 18, South West Frontier Political Despatch Register (SWFPDR), 20 April 1820 to 7 June 1821, Vol. XXVII.
- 12 This fact is corroborated by the Tuckey Settlement Village Papers.
- 13 I am inspired by Partha Chatterji (1992: 169–209).
- 14 Roughsedge to Metcalfe, para 15.