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Studying Contrasting Environmental Realities of the Adivasis of pre-Colonial and Colonial Eras

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the changing environmental realities of the Adivasis across the ages. 'Environment' here refers to both 'ecological' and 'social' and may be viewed as mutually inter-dependent. The methodology is one of looking at the changing environmental realities of the Adivasis from evolutionary perspective following Braudel's model of 'dialectic of time spans'. The objective is to map the broader shades of changes taking place in the material as well as the ecological world of the Adivasis. The time-frame of investigation roughly begins from the pre-colonial period and ends with the closure of the nineteenth century a period that signaled major transformations in the life of the Adivasis.

Introduction

The search for alternative approach to environment has of late drawn worldwide attention of scholars across the disciplines. The recent surge in academic interest over the Adivasis of both colonial and post-colonial India may partly be seen as a result of the urge to study the distinctive cultural patterns of the 'Other'¹. The curiosity for knowing the past environmental perception of the Adivasis is but natural as it was this sense of physical environment that had helped them to survive the test of time and had also dictated their world view including the whole gamut of their socio-religious beliefs and practices. Whether it contains an alternative perception about preservation and maintenance of physical environment relevant even today is an argument subject to controversy. But doubts have never been cast regarding its existence, and the interaction between nature and culture has been viewed as a heritage of Indian tradition relayed down to us through generations. The theoretical frameworks to address it are however multiple. For some, it is 'environmental idealism' (Rycroft 2017: 29) or 'ecological romanticism', (Prasad 2014) while others view it more in terms of inter-relationship between natural ecology and 'social or human ecology' (Mukherjee 1923: 1-28). Whatever it may be, rethinking the past environmental perception of the Adivasis will

¹ The term 'other' generally refers to the colonized subjects. It is used by many theorists like Sarte, Derrida and Lacan including others in their writings. Nowadays the term has a wide connotation encompassing caste, class, identity and gender of the so called marginalized sections of the society. However, tribals are also considered to belong to the category of other when compared with the mainstream. See Foreword by Gail Omvedt in Vulli Dhanaraju (ed.), *Caste Tribe and Gender, Politics of Self and the Other*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2017.

not be totally unwarranted if we try to trace the roots of the environmental concerns and developmental ethics of modern times. The Adivasi perception of environment, enshrined in need-based use of natural resources, nourishing special sentiments for and reverential attitude towards different manifestations of nature and fostering awareness about the inter-dependent nature of the different elements of the eco-system, has indeed earned global recognition nowadays. Though not always accompanied by a display of gratitude to the Adivasis, efforts are on to popularise this ethos at the popular level, to develop environmental consciousness among common people along lines already adhered to by the Adivasis in the past.

While the materialistic nature of modern society is not hard to seek, controversy exists in determining the exact nature of the Adivasi society. A good deal of attempt has been made by scholars to define it in the past as 'savage', 'uncivilized', 'backward', 'egalitarian' or that the Adivasis living at different stages of evolution etc.² But none of these characterisations seems appropriate in exposing the full length of the dimensions of the Adivasi society, particularly their relationship with the natural surroundings or the ethos and vibes with which they engaged in a myriad of socio-economic and religious practices. Indeed researches are still on to determine their exact nature and recent revisionist scholars have made an advance in this direction by claiming that the Adivasis are an inseparable part of the ecological settings of the areas they lived in (Guha 1999).³ What is usually left out while defining the Adivasis is the morale and philosophy of their life which in essence is a combination of history, mythology, religion, migration, and affinity with nature, a philosophy which roughly comes close to what, in modern times we call 'unity in diversity' and 'live and let-live' philosophy of life.

This paper does not seek to expose the nature-culture interface over the centuries drawing references from the world of the Adivasis. The primary focus of this essay is to study how a given ecological setting gives birth to a set of ideas and sentiments that govern socio-economic and religious engagements of people. An imagined world then comes into being unknowingly based on those beliefs and practices of people which keep them busy day and night to meet their earthly necessities and aesthetic aspirations. This world then develops enough resilience to withstand vicissitudes and stresses of time and evolution, unless of course changes start to creep into its ecological setting to accommodate increasing pressures of urbanization, industrialization and commercialization and meeting the rising demands of a growing population. In the milieu, the familiar world gradually disintegrates giving way to an entirely new set of ideas, attitudes and responses that are remarkably different from the earlier ones.

This paper has two sections. In the first section, the past perception of the Adivasis regarding environment prevalent during the ancient and medieval times has been explored and examined. The wide time-frame of reference is deliberately chosen because it is during this phase when one may find indigenous environmental ethos and ideas

²Formulations on Adivasi society are multiple. Earlier attempts to define the Adivasis particularly during the colonial times were primarily based on looking at them in comparison to the civilized people of the mainstream and hence emerged such characterizations like 'savage', 'forest-dweller', 'animist' and so on. But these formulations have become obsolete today in view of the change in popular perception about them.

³Many scholars have criticized the colonial attempts at overdrawn of the separation between the Adivasis and their ecological settings.

were at its operative best both in terms of theory and practice. The equilibrium in nature was broadly maintained without major interventions initiated in the landscape, particularly forest-cover, rivers and mountains. Therefore, the issues that disturb mankind in present times like environmental crisis or imbalance did not arise. The second section deals with the modern period starting with the colonial rule till the end of the 19th century, when major interventions were brought in by the colonial masters in Indian ecological setting inspired by their own imperialist/colonialist agenda. The import of new ideas of mercantilism, market economy and commercialization of agriculture that laid the foundations of the colonial rule in India had three ramifications. While it changed the face of the natural world and left adverse impact on the socio-economic and cultural lives of the tribals, it also paved the way for the much-dreaded environment crisis to surface in the long run. The roots of this crisis lay undeniably embedded in the colonial policy of initiating ruthless intervention into the natural environment, notwithstanding its merit in sustaining huge population and developing the cradles of modern civilization that have been carried out and perpetuated in the subsequent centuries down to the post-colonial period. While the discussion in the first section will be more of a general type owing to the absence of region-specific sources it will, I hope, not mark any abrupt departure when discussion of the second section follow with reference to the Santhals of southwest Bengal.

Perception about nature

The broader shades of the environmental thoughts of the Adivasis which were manifest in their unique ideas relating to land, water, forest and mountains including disease and death bear a close resemblance with what the ancient people thought about environment in general. Though not much works have been done so far to identify the points of convergence between the two traditions (of the Sanskritic tradition and Indigenous tradition of the non-Aryan people) regarding environment, it has been found that in many respects the views of one tradition overlap the other with threads of commonality being shared by both the traditions. For example, in ancient Indian texts namely the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and the Epics it has been stated that one of the pre-requisites for survival was to interact successfully with the surrounding world in order to procure food, shelter and other logistics of living like hunting and fighting diseases (Vannucci 1993: 67). The ancient Indian texts view the natural world as a single unit, together with all living and non-living beings. Man had to identify natural powers and to submit to the dictates of winds, flood, drought earthquake and other vagaries of nature in their life. To remain free from their adverse effects, men were forced to resort to magic and odd religious practices.⁴ In the Vedas, we find hymns that offer worship to different natural forces with fear and reverence. A regular rainfall needed intervention of gods. Even many rites were practiced by the early Indians to minimise the impacts of vicious natural events. The *Rg Vedic* outlook of 'one' which 'manifests in all' can be comprehended in contemporary ecological term as 'everything is associated to everything else.'⁵ In the

⁴Chandrani Banerjee Mukherjee, 'Thoughts on Climate on Early Indian Texts', *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. LIV, Nos. 3 & 4, October, 2014-March 2015, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid, Also see Shukla Das, 'Concern for Environment: An Early Indian Perspective,' in *Journal of the Ancient Indian History*, Vol. XXI, 200-2002, University of Calcutta, p. 130.

socio-religious tradition of the Adivasis, similar references are available in plenty. Santhal creation narratives,⁶ for example, indicate that all creations in this earth followed the divine wish and were united in a chain system sharing essential link with each other. These narratives also contain references to different elements of nature and their role in creating this earth as well as the stages that preceded the emergence of mankind. The belief of Santhal ancestors on *Thakur Jiu*'s role in creating this earth and human beings is clearly pronounced in these narratives. Successive stages of creation beginning with water to aquatic plants and animals, to birds and finally the creation of human beings is clearly spelled out. In these narratives, human beings were regarded as a part of the process of the same divine creation that also witnessed creation of water, earth, forests, aquatic animals and birds. The only difference being the acknowledgement that mankind perhaps emerged at the end of this creation process to be preceded by all other living or non-living organisms. As such, in Santhal tradition, human species was not assigned any special position of respect for their intellectual calibre, or ethical supremacy and were merely treated as one among the other creations of god. Indeed this approach of the Santhals had imparted among them both a sense of respect and fear for supernatural forces capable of causing death and devastation if hurt or displeased. This approach to nature may also be said to have laid the ideological foundations of all their socio-religious beliefs and practices.

Little wonder, aboriginal animism acquired its origin in this context. Though it is difficult to ascertain when and how did animism actually emerge there is a common consensus among scholars that actually animism preceded the birth of the so-called religions of mankind, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam for example. At the dawn of religious thinking, deities were imagined by primitive societies to reside in stones, trees, animals and woods. This animism seems to be an expression of the gratitude to and respect for nature for providing goods and services to human society (Deb 2007: 3). While this practice of worshipping stones, trees, animals and woods as deities continued unabated in tribal tradition they increasingly took human form in Sanskritic tradition and came to be worshipped as goddesses Durga, Kali, Lakshmi etc. A somewhat convergence of tribal and Sanskritic traditions took place in medieval times giving birth to cults like *Manasa*, *Sitala*, *Dharmaraj-thakur* etc., which had been worshipped as folk deities by a huge mass of peasant population including the tribals in Rarh Bengal.⁷ The myths⁸ in Indian tradition also contain lots of references to the practice of animism by the Adivasis in the past. Integral to it was their belief in spiritual entity including ghosts and spirits all of whom were not benevolent to mankind. The lofty mountain peaks facing towards the sky, the unique formation of rocks, huge trees

⁶The narrative mentioned above is popularly known as Skrefsrud's version of Santal creation narrative which is said to have been taken down by Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud in 1870-1871 from an old guru named Kolean. It is contained in the Santali book '*Horkoren Mare HapramkoReak Katha*. In addition to this, another version of the same is also available published by Rev. A. Campbell entitled *Santal Tradition*. Also see T. Hembrom, *The Santals*, Calcutta, PunthiPustak, 1996, 82-87.

⁷Kosambi (1962) and Gadgil and Vartak (1976, 1981) state that most of the cults associated with the Sacred Groves in Maharashtra are Mother Goddess cults. In contrast, most of the Sacred Groves in Karnataka and Kerala are abodes of non-Sanskritic deities including snake gods. In West Bengal, the cults surrounding the Sacred Groves range from animistic tribal deities and ancestral spirits to Sanskritized deities like Shiva and Kali, and medieval subaltern deities like Sitala and Manasa.

⁸D.D. Kosambi mentions many such myths in his book *Myth and Reality*, Bombay, 1962.

and dense forests, dark caves and snowy glacier lakes were imagined by people as abodes of ghosts and spirits. The growth of mythologies in primordial societies was essentially linked with the human psychology and was transformed into beliefs and myths with the passage of time. Aboriginal mythology, ethno-medicine and animism are thus testimonies to nature-culture interaction in ancient times about which evidences are strikingly absent in Adivasi literature (Banerjee 2016: 131-153). Mythology harnessed for identity assertion built around the close linkage with the landscape.

Likewise, ancient Indian scriptures and literature contain many references to protection of forests and forest lives. The importance of forest had been outlined by Kautilya who suggested creation of a special department of forests.⁹ There existed three categories of forests under the Mauryas, such as Game forest, Timber forest, and Elephant forest. Game forests were meant for the members of the ruling elites, for royal sport and hunting. The second kind of forests were rich in timber quality which were used for building forts, chariots etc., which had much economic value for the state. The third was reserved for elephants to ensure supply of elephants during war. Under the Mauryas forests were entirely owned and controlled by the state. The kings were not allowed to burn down forests. Kautilya was of opinion that there should be legislations to prevent destruction of forests including the wild life. Accordingly, checks were imposed against hunting, poaching and burning down of forests. Kautilya also suggested about the creation of a separate forests for each different type of produce. 'Thus it is clear that forests served a manifold purpose during the Mauryan times. Forestry came under the purview of economic legislation of Kautilya which displays an advanced knowledge of forest economy' (Rasik 2016: 10).¹⁰ In the Vedas and Upanishads, similar references to protection and preservation of forests are available in abundance. Asoka's penchant for protecting forests and wild animals was proverbial.

The same sentiment for forests was also being shared by the Adivasis. In most cases, forests were cleared before establishing villages. Santhals used to clear as much forests as they needed for setting up villages or creating agricultural land. Also trees were sometimes cut down for acquiring fuel-wood or building houses. Before the advent of the British, the Santhals used to enjoy customary rights over forests. The place in the forest thick in Sal and Mahua trees was earmarked by them as a *sacred grove*. The institution of sacred groves is perhaps 'as old as the civilization itself', born at a time when pristine religion was taking shape (Deb 2007: 3; Skolimowski 1991). In Santhal culture, groves appeared as a sacred place of worship for only the male members of the villages. Such groves were also storehouse of many plant species with medicinal value absent in other parts of the forest. Taboos and stories are in wide circulation relating to groves. It is said that attempts by individuals to cut down trees or to hunt animals in the groves have often resulted in death or severe injury to the encroachers. Thus, belief upon the reigning deity of the groves who extended protection to the entire vegetation in the

⁹Long before colonial interest towards Indian forests had come to be known forests continued to occupy a central place in the popular imagination of people both as a place of reverence and a place to be felt afraid of. Kautilya's *Arthasashtra* is believed to be one of the oldest references to the art of governance existed in early India. Aloka Parasher Sen, 'Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest Dwellers in the Mauryan Period', *Studies in History*, 14, 2, 1998.

¹⁰Anuranjini Rasik, 'Forestry: Its Economic Significance as Reflected in Arthasastra of Kautilya', *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. LV, Nos. 3 & 4, October, 2015– March 2016, p.10.

grove, was substantiated Gadgil and Vartak (1994: 87).¹¹ We get a fine account of how in different sacred groves some of these reigning deities originally belonging to indigenous tribal tradition were being Sanskritised in course of time being replaced by some of the popular deities of the mainstream Hindu society (Deb 2007: 4). The belief in totems and taboos in tribal societies may be said to have surfaced in the backdrop of this cultural tradition of the Adivasis which nourished special sentiments for all the biotic and abiotic elements of the natural world.

This particular perception of the Adivasis about the physical environment around had given birth to certain types of socio-economic and religious engagements in the Adivasi society that define their cultural traits, ethnic identity and philosophy of life. The prevalence of slash and burn method of cultivation, egalitarian economy, the practice of collective land-ownership right, less-segregated state of society and sharing community centric work-ethos and solidarity had become the hallmark of their living in the past. Traditional healing practices that produced the heritage of ethno-medicine and associated superstitions were also in many ways related to this perception about natural environment. It may also be partly responsible for the birth of gender discrimination in the Santhal society since females were believed to be better endowed with the knowledge of medicinal value of different herbs, bulks and roots than their male counterparts. The healing capacity of Santhal women and their role as 'Shamans' was never recognized in the Santhal society though women's movement in forests as well their superior knowledge on natural vegetation of the region were quite established in the community domain of Chhotanagpur. Further, the fear of immediacy of female sex with the Bongas constantly haunted the minds of Santhal men. The belief in witchcraft and the practice of witch-hunting might have emerged in this backdrop of gender discrimination existing in the Santhal society. The religious festivals of the Santhals spanning throughout the year surrounding agricultural activities should also be viewed as parts of their interaction with nature. The most important of the festivals were *SoharaeSim*, *Baha*, *ErokSim*, *Iri-Gundhi*, *Nawai* and *Janther*. Besides, other important festivals like *Karam*, *JomSim*, and *MakMore* were also important. Charulal Mukherjee has commented in this context that,

'It seems as if the very heart of the tribe beats in unison with the advent of these tribal events, for it is here that the Santal plunges into his primitive herd-life to worship the tribal deities, to sing the advent of the agricultural season, to make merry over a bumper crops and to ward off by magic, the pests that hinder the sweet and even flow of their common life' (Mukherjee 1962: 232).

Thus, the life of the Santhals in the past was nature-oriented and the whole gamut of magico-religious beliefs and practices including festivals were in a sense aimed at celebrating their relationship with nature. The distinctive element of this philosophy was

¹¹ References to reigning deities of sacred groves are available in plenty. In many places such deities might have emerged as village gods or goddesses. The cults of Chandi, Manasa or Dharmaraj Thakur as village gods or goddesses of the subaltern people might have owed their origin in this backdrop of relationship of people with nature.

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the recognition that human beings held a position same as the other creatures, biotic and abiotic alike, in the natural world and that they were essentially linked with the ecological environment they lived in. Accordingly, dependence on nature and need-based use of natural resources became an integral part of their religio-cultural ethos.

Medieval period

There is little doubt that majority of these ideas of the Adivasis related to nature and culture continued unabated during the medieval times. It should however be attributed to two reasons. Firstly, the areas inhabited by the Adivasis (here the frontier districts of south-west Bengal) were rendered inaccessible by dense jungle, rugged and hostile terrain, absence of proper roadways, flood-prone rivers and almost inaccessible mountain passes that acted as a natural defense around the region. Indeed, medieval historians attributed the security of the Malla rulers to the natural defense of their territories. Secondly, the Muslim rulers never interfered in the internal administration of the Jungle zamindars.¹² The Bhum rajas of the frontier districts of Bengal or the Malla rulers of Bishnupur used to pay an annual tribute or *Peskash* to the emperors of Delhi, in return of which they were virtually left independent within their own kingdoms.

Little wonder, the world of the Adivasis of south-west Bengal, under those rajas in medieval times, was generally a closed one far removed from the din and bustle of urban life with little or no interference from the outside world. Mostly living in the lap of nature depending wholly on the thriving village system (there may be debates on its form) headed by a *Manjhi* or spokesman to settle all transactions with the zamindars and kings, the Adivasis indulged in a myriad of nature-friendly beliefs and practices consistent with their own pristine cultural ethos. It was not that their society remained stagnant and immobile at that time. Rather, the inner dimension of the Adivasi society kept on evolving during the medieval period as much as they did in the past. While their perception about nature remained more or less the same, some important changes that had crept into their life in the medieval period merits attention.

Firstly, the village system of the Adivasis, which was the bedrock of their ethnic life seems to have assumed a more complete form during the medieval times than it ever before with an elaborate hierarchy of officials fast coming up under the leadership of a headman known as *Manjhi* in the Santhal society. With it, a faint beginning of the process of social stratification and hierarchical division in the Santhal society came to the fore. The social and cultural life of the Santhals then appeared to be satisfactory as they enjoyed almost perfect freedom from all bondages and were subjected neither to any form of oppressive taxation nor exploitation by outsiders or superior landlords. This happened because in the 17th century in the wake of the decline of the imperial control of the Mughals some big feudatory chiefs, namely the 'bhum' rajas (regions named after those bhum rajas like Dhalbhum, Sikharbhum, Manbhum, Barabhum, etc.) emerged in the frontier districts of Bengal. They had leased out their vast estates to several landlords who on their turn came in agreements with the Adivasi Sardars or village headmen either to guard or protect the

¹²*West Bengal District Hand Book*, Bankura, Calcutta, 1951, p. xi.

far-flung areas of the estate or to collect whatever revenue possible from the region. But in no circumstances, these arrangements proved binding or oppressive on the Adivasis. Moreover, at the individual level, the concern for the rent to be paid or tension about the security of tenure or about the modality of village administration to be followed was non-existent since these were all managed by their Sardars. Such care free and prosperous state of life of the Adivasis during medieval times have well been conjectured and recorded by a host of medieval chroniclers and writers (like Abul Fazl) including early colonial administrators and missionaries. T. Allen, (Magistrate of Birbhum) for example admitted that, 'it is almost entirely owing to the vitality of this system of village rule that the Sonthals have not been absorbed long ago amongst low-caste Hindoos'.¹³ Campbell, a missionary of Pakhoria mission in Manbhum also wrote, 'When a Sonthal hive settles in the jungle to clear a location and establish a village the manjee is to the Sonthal hive what the Queen Bee is to the hive of bees; they cannot get on without him.'¹⁴ The missionaries, who were the early witnesses to the state of affairs of the Santhals have made many such remarks that contain glimpses of the Santhal society in the medieval period.

Secondly, increase in Adivasi population in the medieval period undoubtedly took place but it did not pose any problem owing to the abundance of land and the natural talent of the Adivasis, Santhals in particular, for clearing jungles and creating cultivable lands. Moreland, for example, has given a population estimate of India of nearly 100 million in the 17th century, while Kingsley Davis to 125 million and Shireen Moosvi to 145 million during the same period.¹⁵ It is important to notice that though population was increasing, its pressure on environment was not heavy. The general physical atmosphere was so pleasant that a traveller passing through the Mughal empire was surprised to see the absence of physicians. Even in the works of saint poet Tulsidas and Abul Fazl references to good health and spiritual disposition of people are frequent.¹⁶

Thirdly, one cannot ignore the possibility of interaction between the Adivasis and the non-Adivasis that came close on the heels of the process of Sanskritisation spanning across the centuries of the medieval age. Signs of such interaction in cultural and linguistic spheres between the two traditions are pretty evident. While in religio-cultural field, one may notice several Hindu deities getting incorporated in the pantheon of tribal gods and goddesses and Adivasi women coming under the influence of the marriage rituals of the Hindus, in linguistic sphere such borrowing and lending process appears to be more glaring. Hunter wrote,

'While treating of the alphabet, we found reasonable ground to conjecture that the Aryan invaders of India had come in contact with the Santhals, or a cognate race, in primitive times and that Prakrit a very early form of Sanskrit, had adopted some pure Santali terms'. (Hunter 1975: 97).

¹³ Bengal Judicial Progs, May 1872, WBSA (Allen's report dt. 23 Jan 1872).

¹⁴ Bengal Judicial Progs, December, 1871, vol. no. 161, Govt. of Bengal to Govt. of India, 6 December 1871, WBSA.

¹⁵ Taken from NeeraShukla, op. cit., pp. 92-93.

¹⁶ Ibid, 95.

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According to Grierson,

‘...the purest Santali is spoken in the north especially in the Santal Parganas and in Manbhum. The dialect spoken in Midnapore, Balasore, Singhbhum and Orissa tributary states is more mixed. It shows signs of gradually yielding to Aryan influence...’ (Grierson 1967: 30-35).

Fourthly, the socio-political institutions of the Adivasis might have also undergone changes in the medieval period depending on the broader linguistic or cultural identity of the regions they lived in. The Paharias, for example, came to be politically constituted into northern and southern group of tribes, corresponding with the two sub-groups of the Paharia; the northern belonging to the Savaria Paharia, and the southern to the Mal Paharia. The former had an appropriate language and had not the least vestige of the doctrine of caste. Contrary to northern part, the southern tribe had adopted the Hindi or Bengali language as spoken in low lands adjacent to their hills (Martin 1976: 82–83). Similar north-south division is also noticeable among the Santhals. Campbell for example has stated that northern Santali or that spoken in Bhagalpur, Monghyr, Santal Parganas, Birbhum, Bankura and Hazaribag was the language of the overwhelming majority of the tribe and was more polished than southern Santali (cited from Baske 1999: 7). Besides, there might have been other changes that had adored the life of the Adivasis in the medieval period.

II

This section traces the consequences of the importation of colonial ideas and ethos on the physical environment and socio-cultural lives of the Santhals of Southwest Bengal. The nature-centric ideas and activities of the Santhals for the first time came under a serious threat when colonial rule unleashed the forces of commercialisation of agriculture and market economy including the idea of private landownership right in the frontier districts of Bengal. Added to it were administrative changes, enactment of forest regulations and introduction of colonial knowledge production mechanism, the cumulative effects of which brought the Santhals under the subjection of a new kind of distressing reality hitherto unprecedented in their life. These new changes should be viewed as integral parts of the larger project of colonising India that affected both the physical and social ecologies of the country. The journey began with the introduction of land revenue regulations to be followed by other interventions as and when necessary in the ecological and socio-economic world of the Santhals to fulfill imperial interest.

Impact of land revenue regulations on the areas of Jungle Mahals

The British control over Jungle Mahals was established in the last quarter of the 18th century. The attempt to bring the lands of this area under assessment for revenue dated back to 1767, when Ensign Fergusson led a military expedition in the western part of the Jungle Mahals, an area, which later formed the district of Midnapore. But to collect revenue from the areas of Jungle Mahals was not an easy task. Though the amount of revenue fixed in these areas was not heavy the government officials till found it difficult to collect them from the tribals of the regions. As a consequence of default in the payment of revenue by the jungle zamindars, most of their estates were put up for sale in the last decade of the 18th century.

The destruction of the old ruling families and the emergence of a new class of zamindars, talukdars (in zamindari hierarchy talukdars come next to the zamindars with landed property little less than the zamindars) and other groups of revenue farmers had caused considerable tension in rural Bengal. This can be said to be the beginning of the forces of disruption in the agrarian society of Bengal. The new, relatively small zamindars and talukdars who stepped into their shoes with the obligation of meeting revenue demands on a regular basis along with proprietary rights over land, totally destroyed the ardour of zamindari paternalism in the Jungle Mahals.¹⁷ The mutual trust and bonds between the tenants and the zamindars, based on feudal relationships, became a thing of the past. The resultant effect brought as much tension and discontent to the new owners of the land as to the tribal residents of the respective estates.

The Santhals, including other groups of tribals, could not rest in peace in this situation. The most aggressive among them were the Bhumijis, who had earlier enjoyed land without any payment of revenue, either under some invalid title or in lieu of certain police duties as ghatwals or *sardar-ghatwals* (protectors of strategically important passes or hostile terrains). The resumption and assessment of the ghatwali lands by the British had caused the Bhumij sardar ghatwals to flare up, thus putting the areas of the Jungle Mahals in a state of turmoil. They became further hostile when the duty of superintendence of police as well as the power to appoint and dismiss individual ghatwals was invested in the hands of the magistrate collector.¹⁸ The Chuar rebellion of 1799 and the *Ganga Narayan Hangama* or the Bhumij revolt of 1832 were reflections of social unrest and turbulence of the time that followed the introduction of the Permanent Settlement. The last decades of the 18th century, thus, witnessed a turmoil in the agrarian society of the Jungle Mahals, resulting from an attempt to introduce revenue laws by the British government, on the one hand, and the tribals flaring up in violent protests against the curtailment of their rights, on the other. However, the Santhals being peace-loving by nature did not join hands in the mass outcry of the late 1790s. They preferred the backwoods of the jungles to participating in the general disaffection of the region (Jha 1967).

Administrative changes

Close on the heels of revenue regulations appeared administrative changes introduced by the British. As disorder and mismanagement reigned supreme during this time, the Company's administration took the decision to bring changes in the administrative set up of the region. In 1805, a new regulation, known as Regulation XVIII was enacted. Under this regulation, a separate magistrate was appointed for the Jungle Mahals for the immediate superintendence of the district. The zamindars and the managers were entrusted with the local charge of police, jointly with the police-darogas. It was decided that the districts called 'Jungle Mahals', composing of the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan and Midnapore should be separated from the jurisdiction of the magistrates of those districts and would be placed under the jurisdiction of a district officer, known as the 'Magistrate of the Jungle Mahals'.

¹⁷West Bengal District Gazetteers, Bankura, 376.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 376.

Suchibrata Sen, however, has also attributed the creation of the new district of the Jungle Mahals to the Chuar Rebellion of 1799 (Sen 1984: 8). Thus, the areas of the Jungle Mahals witnessed profound changes in terms of administrative management of the East India Company. K. Sivaramakrishnan has analysed the same from the standpoint of state formation efforts of the Company in the frontier districts of Bengal that led to the re-territorialization of the region to suit imperial interests (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 14). Taking note of the natural vegetation and distinct cultural traits of the inhabitants of the region he characterizes it as 'zones of anomaly' which had offered considerable challenges to the British to pacify.

Santhal migration to *Damin-i-Koh*

It was in this context that the Santhals of Jungle Mahals, were forced to leave outdoor in search of a better homeland. With this began the process of great historical importance, namely, Santhal migration to Damin-i-Koh (Birt 1905: 10-11). 'It was this migration to the Damin that first involved the Santhals in the apparatus of the colonial state' (Chowdhury 2004: 13). There are multiple interpretations by scholars as to what led the Santhals of the erstwhile Jungle Mahals (Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore, including the other parts of the Jungle Mahals) to migrate to Damin.

In the changing situation, ever since land revenue regulations came into force land now became a marketable commodity and a lucrative field of investment. A spirit of professionalism ensued in the sale and management of land, as landed property now became accessible to any person with capital and a capacity for land management. The revenue regulations of the East India Company attracted many foreigners, traders, businessmen, mahajans (moneylenders) and others to the rural society of Bengal. They all tried to make good fortunes at the cost of land and labour of Santhals. Among them the exploitation by mahajans was worst. Several factors such as frequent famines, sharp rise in prices of commodities, demand for money during the sowing and harvesting seasons and to meet family and social obligations hurled the Santhals into the debt net of the mahajans.

After the Santhal *Hool* (1855-56) both in the Santhal Parganas district and the erstwhile Jungle Mahals things did not improve much for the Santhals. Zamindari and mahajani exploitation continued unabated and the arbitrary enhancement of rent continued to impoverish the Santhals. Robertson's Settlement Report testifies to the fact that the arbitrary enhancement of rent was what the Santhal *manjhis* (village headmen) had to face quite often after settling on the land of the zamindars.

Santhal emigration for labour

The disruption of the agrarian economy forced the Santhals to look at other avenues of employment apart from land. This led to the beginning of the process of Santhal migration for labour to various parts of the country. The coal mines of the neighbouring districts and the tea gardens of Assam and Duars provided them opportunities. The agents of tea planters in Assam recruited a huge number of Santhals to work in the tea gardens. The Bengal-Nagpur railways that used to pass through Adra-Kharagpur division and the huge coal belt stretching across vast areas of Raniganj, Asansol,

Dhanbad regions provided enormous employment opportunities to Santhal labourers. McAlpin shows that among other places, the Santhals of Bankura district preferred to go to *Namal* (Burdwan) for labour. During the transplanting and harvesting seasons, they used to get as much as 5 to 6 *annas* a day (McAlpin 1981: 61-62). Usually they brought back substantial money with which they paid off the debts incurred by their families in their absence. The rest of the money was spent on drink.

Impact of emigration

Indeed, the result of this emigration for labour proved disastrous for the cultural ethos of the Santhals including their sense of identity. Away from home and a familiar environment, they felt helpless and their ethnic solidarity also started to wane. Though they were temporarily relieved from the acute scarcity of food or earnings, the effect of emigration had an adverse impact. It led to the

‘change of the population gradually from cultivating to a labouring population...Socially it has had a debasing effect, because in his search for labour he is freed from the influence of the village community and is thrown into contact with all sorts and conditions of persons, many of these of a criminal type from whom he derives looser ideas of truth, morality and caste. These evil social effects are in their turn weaning the Santhal from his hereditary occupation of clearing the jungle’ (McAlpin 1981: 63).

With this spurt in immigration other vices including liquor addiction became rampant.

Disintegration of the Manjhi/Mandali system

Meanwhile, the position of the manjhis in the village society of the Santhals became precarious. In the erstwhile Jungle Mahals his position was no better than an *ijaradar* or *tahsildar* (a form of revenue farmer in charge of collecting rent). ‘In Balasore he is little more than a *tahsildar*, in Bankura and North Midnapore he is a tenure holder, and in Birbhum he is a quasi tenure holder’ (McAlpin 1981:72). However, the post of manjhi was not abandoned altogether and assumed different names in different places. The introduction of the British revenue system had altered the role of the manjhis in their society, as they now became government nominees, who could enjoy office only if they met the obligations of the government. These new developments regarding the post of *manjhi*, marked a radical departure from the traditional power and status of the *manjhis* in the villages. As a result of all these maladies, the social organization of the Santhals received a severe set-back. The *majhi/mandali* system, the essence of the Santhal social structure, was broken. This process of disintegration of the Santhal village system seems to have started with the change in the status of the manjhis. McAlpin, in his report, has discussed at length the process of disintegration of the village system of the Santhals.

Thus by the end of the nineteenth century the Santhals of southwest Bengal appeared at the doorsteps of change in all respects, material, psychological and ecological. They were forced to accept the peasant economy of the plains and their status became same as the impoverished peasant masses of rural Bengal. The process de-tribalisation had also set in to a certain degree. The colonial forest legislations of 1878 and of subsequent decades had hammered the last nail in the coffin of their

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nature oriented life-style as in a single stroke of a pen they became outsiders in their own forests. While tribal response against these intrusions into their ecology and socio-economic life took the form of violent demonstrations in the first half of the 19th century the second half witnessed relative calmness and was more marked by the display of socio-cultural awareness which converted into political and territorial awareness at the turn of the 20th century. However, the only ray of hope that kept flickering amidst all these disturbing experiences of the tribals was the knowledge producing mechanism of the colonial rule that for the first time built a common awareness about tribal ethnography in India and recognised the distinctive traits of tribal culture the reflection of which is pretty evident in the shifting strands of colonial approach to Indian Adivasis.

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