

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**REBELS AND DEVOTEES OF JHARKHAND:  
SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS  
AMONG THE ADIVASIS OF NORTHERN INDIA**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF PH.D.

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

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## **Abstract**

'Tribe' and 'caste' have been a recurrent and hotly debated issue in Indian anthropology. There appears to be a consensus that originally flexible and fluid social compositions have been 'essentialised' into either 'caste' or 'tribe' categories (Deliege 1985; Cohn 1987), and that in fact a continuum exists, along which groups can be located according to their specific caste or tribal features (Ghurye 1943; Bailey 1960; Mandelbaum 1970).

The present study contributes to this debate by providing innovative insights on the nature of 'tribe' and 'caste' in contemporary India. The study is an ethnographic and anthropological investigation of two divergent yet interrelated phenomena among the Ho and Munda 'tribal' groups of a forested area of Jharkhand, northern India: the emergence of a new 'caste' through the embracing of a Hindu reformist movement by some and the simultaneous revival of tribal essence and adherence to ancestral teachings and spiritual practices by others.

Consistent with Srinivas' (1966) Sanskritisation theory, the devotees, or those who convert to the movement, adopt high-caste behaviours and introduce caste discrimination among agnates in the attempt to 'liberate' themselves from the forest as symbol of their 'backward' past. However, the investigation highlights a number of relevant exceptions. It is argued that a process of 'de-Sanskritisation' is taking place among those who retain ancestral practices. By reviving the ancestral notion of wilderness and mastery over forests, these - the rebels - remain faithful to the primordial link between spirits, land and people and continue their ancestors' fight against land and forest dispossession. It is concluded that, to the rebels, it is not Brahmanical criteria of purity and pollution but territorial precedence and mediation with local spirits that legitimise higher social status claims.

## CONTENTS

Maps, plates and diagrams .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Glossary of selected terms .....	vii
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Summary and structure of the thesis .....	3
<b>Chapter One: Terrain and background .....</b>	<b>8</b>
The Jharkhand state and its Scheduled Tribes.....	8
The Mundari-speaking ‘Tribes’ .....	9
Porahat area in Singhbhum district .....	11
Dirih and Bhanjara villages and their inhabitants .....	12
History of the two settlements and local conflicts .....	14
<b>Chapter Two: The people of Porahat .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction: a practice-based approach.....	19
‘Forest people’: Hos and Mundas .....	20
A warrior caste: the Rautias .....	22
Ho-Mundas and Rautias: sons of the soil <i>versus</i> outsiders .....	26
<b>Chapter Three: The social organisation and reproduction of the Mundas .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Introduction .....	31
Social organization .....	31
Clan .....	31
<i>Khunt</i> or <i>bonso</i> .....	33
House, family .....	33
Brotherhood .....	34
Social reproduction.....	36
The making of a social person .....	36
The making of ancestors .....	50
Conclusion.....	67
<b>Chapter Four: The Munda kinship system .....</b>	<b>68</b>
Introduction .....	68
Kinship terminology .....	70
Dravidian features .....	70
The <i>gungu</i> kintype .....	74
Marriage patterns.....	80
Siblings-exchanges.....	82
Conclusion.....	86
<b>Chapter Five: The rebels and the ideology of graveyards .....</b>	<b>87</b>
Introduction .....	87
Indigenous notions of land rights .....	89
The association between clans and land .....	89
Graveyards as icons of territorial belonging .....	94
From graveyards to land records: the Hindu kingdom and the British empire .....	96
The Hindu kingdom .....	96
The British empire .....	99
The Rebels and the State .....	104

From a millennial movement to a political party .....	104
A local rebellion: the Jangal Andolan .....	107
Jharkhand or Vanachal state? .....	112
Conclusion .....	116
<b>Chapter Six: The <i>Bodh dharom</i>, a new religious path.....</b>	<b>118</b>
Introduction .....	118
The <i>dharom</i> and witchcraft .....	120
Reasons for the entry of the <i>dharom</i> in Dirih-Bhanjara .....	120
Spiritual changes – an overview .....	125
The <i>dharom</i> : Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traits.....	131
Sufi saints, dargahs, and exorcising rituals .....	133
Hindu devotional movements .....	143
Gautam Buddha and the ‘rules’ of the <i>dharom</i> .....	150
Rupture, transformations, and continuities.....	158
Rupture .....	158
Continuity and transformation .....	162
Clothing the naked girl as a British man: the masculinisation of religion .....	166
Conclusion .....	170
<b>Chapter Seven: The devotees and the birth of a new caste.....</b>	<b>171</b>
Introduction .....	171
The birth of a new caste .....	172
Mundaris, a classic example of Sanskritisation: .....	172
The religious and caste divide .....	174
Wilderness’ and the criteria for social status .....	174
Patterns of clan divide:.....	177
Reasons behind Sanskritisation.....	185
Women as agents of Sanskritisation .....	189
Dynamics of caste division and conversion: witches, rice-beer, and wilderness.....	194
Purity vs. pollution: producer vs. poisoner .....	194
‘The poison of the beer’ .....	199
Witchcraft, a female monopoly .....	209
Conclusion .....	215
<b>Chapter Eight: Changes in kinship, social organisation and sacred landscape ..</b>	<b>216</b>
Introduction .....	216
Transformations in kinship and social organisation.....	217
From symmetrical to asymmetrical kinship systems .....	217
An alternative exogamic principle: the <i>gotra</i> category.....	219
Changes in the sacred landscape .....	225
The house .....	225
The graveyard .....	226
Conclusion .....	233
<b>Chapter Nine: People ‘who do not care’ to sanskritise .....</b>	<b>235</b>
Introduction .....	235
De-Sanskritisation .....	236
Reasons for de-Sanskritisation .....	237
The process of de-Sanskritisation.....	241
The role of younger brothers.....	241
The role of younger brothers’ wives.....	243

Perceptions of de-Sanskritisation .....	249
The economic rationale .....	249
The social rationale .....	249
Idioms of de-Sanskritisation: rice beer drinking and witchcraft .....	253
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>262</b>

## Maps, plates and diagrams

Map 1: The State of Jharkhand .....	9
Map 2: West Singhbhum District .....	10
Map 3: The Porahat Estate.....	11
Plate 1: Forest-cutting activities .....	21
Plate 2: 'Forest people' working in rice-fields .....	21
Plate 3: the Rautias of Porahat.....	24
Plate 4: Graveyards and single graves .....	52
Plate 5: Birsaites during the Birsa Munda Anniversary, Dewa village, 1999 .....	105
Plate 6: Birsa Dharom guru .....	106
Plate 7: Old graveyards with inscriptions about the legitimacy of resettlement activities .....	110
Plate 8: A local rally of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha .....	113
Plate 9: Pilgrims living near the <i>dargah</i> in Shiuli village.....	135
Plate 10: Animal sacrifice during <i>Kolom Bonga</i> .....	168
Plate 11: 'Mother Rice' enters and brings water into the house.....	168
Plate 12: Newly-born ritually enters the house for the first time.....	179
Plate 13: Sunita brings water from the pond .....	179
Plate 14: Devotees' graves made of cement .....	228
Plate 15: Brahman officiating devotees' funerary rituals.....	228
Plate 16: Devotee women anointing old and new cement tombs .....	229
Plate 17: 'Traditional' shaman healing a Samad girl in a forest village.....	239
Plate 18: Young members of convert households near a statue of Birsa Munda .....	242
Plate 19: Young members of convert households providing support to the local Jharkhand committee during the State elections, 1999 .....	242
Plate 20: Old husband and wife sitting on the same mat while preparing garlands for <i>Sorai Parob</i> (Dewali) .....	244
Plate 21: Ho women selling rice-beer.....	246
Plate 22: Ho women drinking rice-beer.....	254
Diagram 1: Address and reference Munda kinship terminology .....	69
Diagram 2: Parents' generation (G1).....	70
Diagram 3: Ego's generation (G0) .....	72
Diagram 4: Children's generation (G <sup>-1</sup> ).....	73
Diagram 5: The gungu kintype .....	74
Diagram 6: Breaking through the hierarchies.....	76
Diagram 7: Genealogy of the Bandra clan.....	83
Diagram 8: Examples of bilateral exchanges between Soy and Dangil clans.....	84
Diagram 9: Clan spirits and <i>gotras</i> .....	224

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## Glossary of selected terms

The glossary contains the words that appear several times in the main body of the text. The English plural 's' is often added to aid the flow of the text. Words used infrequently are translated as they arise, and in some cases this translation is repeated in subsequent chapters to aid the reader. Words in the glossary are common to both Ho and Mundari languages, as these are related to one another as dialects of the same language rather than as two separate languages. The Roman script is used. The colon (:) indicates checked (glottalized) vowels while the tilde (~) indicates the nasalized vowel.

### Ho/Mundari languages

<i>Ada</i>	To know
<i>Adiñ</i>	Kitchen
<i>Adwa</i>	Non-boiled rice
<i>Akara</i>	Meeting-place
<i>Baba-jan</i>	Rice grain
<i>Bai</i>	To make
<i>Bolo</i>	To enter, to introduce
<i>Bonga</i>	Spirit, to sacrifice
<i>Buru</i>	Forest, wilderness, untamed
<i>Buru Bongako</i>	Forest spirits
<i>Buru hōko</i>	Forest people
<i>Chauli</i>	Husked rice
<i>Diku</i>	Outsider, foreigner, exploiter
<i>Diri-em</i>	To place the burial stone
<i>Disum</i>	Country, territory
<i>Diyaṇ</i>	Rice-beer
<i>Eta:-haturenko</i>	People from different villages
<i>Gati:</i>	To dance, to befriend
<i>Goe:</i>	To kill, to die
<i>Haga</i>	Agnate, brother
<i>Ham hōko</i>	Old men, ancestors
<i>Hapanum</i>	Maiden
<i>Hasu</i>	Illness



<i>Hatu</i>	Village, the tamed
<i>Hō</i>	Human being, member of the Ho <i>jāti</i>
<i>Homo</i>	Human body
<i>Huriñ</i>	Small
<i>Jan</i>	Bones, seeds
<i>Jan-jilu</i>	Bone-flesh, corpses
<i>Ji</i>	Breath, vital essence
<i>Jom-nū</i>	To eat and drink, to feast
<i>Keya ader</i>	To call inside (ceremony)
<i>Khuntkatti</i>	Pioneering
<i>Khuntkattidar</i>	Pioneer, original founder of a village
<i>Kili tala</i>	To cross clan
<i>Kili</i>	Clan
<i>Kowa</i>	Man
<i>Kui</i>	Woman
<i>Kupul</i>	Affine, guest
<i>Mandi</i>	Boiled rice, food
<i>Manki</i>	Head of confederation of villages
<i>Marañ</i>	Big
<i>Munda</i>	Head of village
<i>Niyam</i>	Law, rule, pact
<i>Owa:</i>	House, family, household
<i>Pir</i>	Confederation of villages
<i>Pundi</i>	White
<i>Re:</i>	To snatch forcibly from, to rob
<i>Rowa</i>	Transplanting activities, soul
<i>Saki</i>	Name-giver, name-receiver
<i>Sasan</i>	Graveyards
<i>Sasan-diri</i>	Stone slabs
<i>Sepēd</i>	Bachelor
<i>Tiu</i>	Rice boiled before being husked
<i>Uru:</i>	To think

### **Hindi language**

In the transliteration I have given preference to the sounds of the words rather than to the rules of Sanskrit orthography. Hence, I have omitted the final 'a' from a number of words.

<i>Adivasi</i>	First inhabitants, sons of the soil
<i>Bhagat</i>	Devotee, a vaishnava ascetic
<i>Bhakti</i>	Devotion, love (esp. for a deity)
<i>Biradari</i>	Brotherhood, sub-caste
<i>Dan</i>	Gift
<i>Dargah</i>	Tomb of saint (Muslim)
<i>Dharma, dharom</i>	Cosmo-moral order, duty, rule
<i>Gau, Goalla</i>	Cattle-herders
<i>Gotra</i>	Exogamous kinship group
<i>Jàti</i>	Caste
<i>Kamar</i>	Potters
<i>Lohar</i>	Blacksmiths
<i>Mahali</i>	Basket makers
<i>Raja</i>	King
<i>Samàj</i>	Community, society
<i>Sarkàr</i>	State
<i>Shakti</i>	Divine power
<i>Tanti</i>	Weavers
<i>Vanachal</i>	Land of forests
<i>Vanvasi</i>	Inhabitants of the forest

## Introduction

This thesis consists in an ethnographic and historical exploration of a case of Sanskritisation and resistance to Sanskritisation, or de-Sanskritisation, among an *adivasi* community of northern India. Since Srinivas' theory in 1966, Sanskritisation has been a recurring theme in anthropological studies in India. On the contrary, the parallel phenomenon of de-Sanskritisation has rarely been covered by the relevant literature.

When dealing with tribal groups, Sanskritisation has generally been understood as the transformation of 'tribe' into 'caste'. 'Tribe' and 'caste' have been a recurrent and hotly debated issue in Indian anthropology. There appears to be a consensus among Indologists that colonial ethnographers and administrators first, and the fathers of the Indian Constitution later, have 'essentialised' originally flexible and fluid social compositions into either 'caste' or 'tribe' categories, according to certain criteria like 'backwardness', 'relative isolation', 'cultural distinctiveness' and traits of 'primitiveness' (Deliege 1985; Cohn 1987). It is also a well-established fact that the dichotomy of 'tribe' and 'caste' is a construct and that in fact a continuum exists along which groups can be located according to their specific caste or tribal features (Ghurye 1943; Bailey 1960; Mandelbaum 1970).

The present study contributes to this debate by providing innovative insights on the nature of 'tribe' and 'caste' in contemporary India. The study revolves around two divergent yet interrelated phenomena: the emergence of a new 'caste' through the embracing of a Hindu reformist movement and the simultaneous revival of tribal culture and adherence to ancestral teachings and spiritual practices.

This thesis deals with the Ho and the Mundari tribal groups of Jharkhand, northern India. The two groups are differentiated both in terms of caste and wealth, with the Mundaris

constituting the 'higher' caste and wealthier group. However, as people recall, Mundaris and Hos used to constitute an endogamous group and to be indiscriminately referred to as 'Ho-Mundas' or simply 'forest people' (*buro hōko*), notwithstanding minor cultural or linguistic differences.

The thesis tells the story of how caste discrimination developed between the two groups. Some amongst them - the devotees - have converted to a Hindu reformist movement and 'sanskritised', or raised their social status by adopting high-caste behaviours (Srinivas 1966). In so doing, they attempt to 'liberate' themselves from their 'backward' past and 'primitive' customs and to raise their social status. By converting, they transform flexible social and cultural boundaries into caste discrimination and give rise to a new caste, the 'Mundaris'. Others - the rebels - have decided to retain or revive their ancestral practices instead. Thus, a process of 'de-Sanskritisation' is also taking place, by which people either break away from their affiliation with the Mundari caste or simply choose to neglect 'sanskritising' opportunities.

It should be clearly stated here that I am not trying to invalidate Srinivas' Sanskritisation theory, which is very well established and documented. Nevertheless, the analysis highlights a number of relevant exceptions. To avoid being trapped into matters of pure definitions and semantics, the analysis focuses on people's own definitions and explanations of directions and mechanisms for change. Social transformation is locally explained in terms of *buru*, i.e., the forest, the untamed, versus *hatu*, the village, the tamed, or in terms of 'backwardness' versus 'modernity'. In particular, changes in perceptions about and uses of forests appear to best represent some important transformations that both women and men have been experiencing in the spiritual, social, political and economic realm.

The forest has therefore been chosen as 'analytical lens' through which to interpret and explain facts, words, accounts, behaviours and choices. Ultimately, it is argued that, by reviving the ancestral notion of wilderness and mastery over forests, those who refuse to 'sanskritise' remain faithful to the primordial link between land, spirits and people as criteria for social status. To them, it is territorial precedence and the mediation with local spirits, rather than Brahmanical criteria of purity and pollution, that legitimise claims of higher social ranking.

The thesis is based upon ethnographic and historical data gathered from August 1998 to December 1999 in two neighbouring villages of Porahat in the Singhbhum district, Jharkhand; in the district archives (District Record Room, Chaibasa, Jharkhand); and at the India Office Library in London. Quantitative data have also been collected through a household survey based on an extensive sample. By covering a period of time of eighteen months and employing local historical records going back as far as 1880s, the analysis highlights changes and continuities in the social, religious and political spheres of a tribal community of northern India.

## **Summary and structure of the thesis**

Chapter One provides a historical and sociological introduction as well as the setting of the research.

Chapter Two shows how cultural attributes such as language, locality, activities, life-style, and religion are naturalised and considered as innate characteristics and historical legacies of particular social groups (Tambiah 1989, Brass 1991, Eriksen 1993, Banks 1996). The chapter further shows how people generally define themselves in relation to 'the other'. Although dichotomous language and primordial ideologies strictly separate 'insiders' from 'outsiders', everyday practices also reveal different degrees of 'other-ness' and blurred boundaries between social groups.

Chapter Three revolves around the social organisation and reproduction of the Mundas. It argues that clan membership is always 'on the making' and derives not simply from birth and marriage but also from death, or better, from the 'placing of the dead' (Bloch 1971). By focusing on the transformative process of affinity into consanguinity and the process of creation of ancestors, the chapter attempts to give evidence of the fact that death is as fundamental as birth is for clan membership. In so doing, it explores the sacred landscape and the transformative role that houses and graveyards play in ensuring the continuity through time and space between affinity and consanguinity and life and death.

Chapter Four deals with Munda kinship terminology and marital practices. In so doing, it attempts to answer to what has been defined as 'the Munda question', i.e., the fact that the Munda kinship system appears to belong to neither Dravidian or Indo-Aryan groups (Trautmann 1981). It first provides a succinct overview of the main terminological features of the system, while highlighting the Dravidian nature of most of them. At the same time, however, the chapter also highlights some distinctive Munda features, which stress equality by suggesting a cyclical notion of generation and by overcoming differences based on seniority, sex, and line of descent. Equality appears also to be the driving force of Mundas' marital practices. Indeed, the second part of the chapter shows how bilateral cross-cousin exchanges and their synchronic implication, sibling-exchanges, constitute Mundas' preferential marriage patterns.

Chapter Five first analyses the intimate connection between land, people, and spirits and highlights the iconic status of graveyards in indigenous notions of spiritual and territorial belonging. Next, the chapter traces conflicting notions of land and forest rights in the process of land dispossession undergone by the Mundas from the British time to the present day. Finally, the chapter deals with people's resistance to

such processes and the so-called 'Jungle Movement' (*Jangal Andolan*) in particular. The movement developed in the 1970s in my field-site and soon spread all over Singhbhum district. In the Subaltern Studies tradition, the chapter reports local narratives and discourses about the movement. The chapter concludes with a reference to the entry of the Hindu Nationalist Party in the two villages and to the tensions arising between supporters of the Jharkhand Party, the tribal party that has traditionally been fighting for tribal self-determination, and supporters of the Hindu nationalist party. Ultimately, it is the forest to be conceptualised differently - for the former, the forest remains a source of power; for the latter, it becomes a space of backwardness. To the latter, the state, and not the forest, represents the new, 'modern' source of legitimacy.

Chapter Six investigates conversion to a Hindu reformist movement and singles out the principal transformations in terms of religious choices and practices. It shows how the movement encouraged the identification of local spirits with Hindu divinities validated by Sanskrit lore and supported by Brahmins. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first two sections describe indigenous beliefs and attempt an analysis of the movement's Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist origins. The last section investigates religious 'change' - rupture and continuity - brought about by the movement. It particularly looks at its monotheistic tendencies and argues that a process of 'masculinisation' of religion is taking place, by which the feminine energy of the divine (*Shakti*) is replaced by the ascetic, austere, and non-violent God *par excellence*, Gautham Buddha. Ultimately, the tension between new and old spiritual practices and the male and female domains is shown to reflect the tension between civilisation and wilderness.

This tension has religious but also social and political facets. The main purpose of Chapter Seven is to investigate the process of Sanskritisation among those who convert to the movement - the 'devotees' - and the consequent caste

discrimination among agnates. The chapter thus analyses the modalities and patterns of clan and caste division. In addition, it investigates the role of women in the process of Sanskritisation and the rationale behind the use of witchcraft as an idiom to talk about social and gender discrimination. Ultimately, the refusal of rice-beer and women exchanges appears to both reflect and contribute to the breaking of bonds of kinship.

Chapter Eight investigates the dramatic changes undergone by the kinship system and the sacred landscape of the devotees. It attempts to shed new insights on the dynamics and modalities of social change among groups living at the 'fringe' of the Hindu world. First, the devotees are developing asymmetrical kinship systems with the possible implication of hierarchical relations between clans. Simultaneously, they have also introduced an alternative exogamic principle to the one based on clans, which is contributing to the transformation of consanguinity into affinity. Thanks to this strategy, the Hindu reformist movement is perpetuating itself endogamously and maintaining its 'purity'. Second, religious affiliations have replaced primordial links. As Weber (1922) suggests, conversion movements have an in-built propensity to devalue kinship bonds as against the claims of religious affiliation. The sacred landscape is also conceived differently. Graveyards and kitchens have stopped being the 'producers' of 'brotherhood' and have become places for 'separation' instead.

Chapter Nine focuses on the opposite process of 'de-Sanskritisation' and explores reasons and dynamics behind such process. Despite Srinivas' theorisation, people who choose not to Sanskritize or abandon the reformist movement have alternative criteria for social legitimacy. By re-evaluating the ancestral notion of wilderness and mastery over forests, non-converts are shown to derive social status not from adoption of Brahmanical criteria of purity and pollution but from precedence in the clearing of the forest and in the mediation with local spirits. Among the less politicised, de-Sanskritisation appears to be the result of a slow process,



which depends upon the influence of neighbours, affines and friends, rather than a deliberate decision. The role played by women is especially focused upon. Being the repositories of most the new rules implied by conversion, women have the power to either support or challenge their husbands' ambitions. In the latter case, they are depicted as witches by the 'devotees' and accused of 'becoming Hos' and hence of lowering the status of their households. Hence the birth of caste discrimination. Female power is denied ritually and materially while the forest is identified with marginality, backwardness and witchcraft practices. On the contrary, 'the plains' are equated with 'civilisation' and become a space for modernity, sophistication and progress.

The names of the two villages where I conducted fieldwork and those of some informants have been changed to ensure people's privacy. Moreover, in the first six chapters, the expression 'Ho-Mundas' refers to both groups without distinguishing between them. On the other hand, chapters Seven, Eight and Nine distinguish between Hos and Mundas, or better, Mundaris, as they explore the process of social, religious and political differentiation between the two groups.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Terrain and background**

#### **The Jharkhand state and its Scheduled Tribes**

The present research deals with the Munda and Ho people of Singhbhum District in the state of Jharkhand, India<sup>1</sup>. The state was carved out of Bihar on November 2000 and is located in the Chota Nagpur plateau of central India. The plateau is an ill-defined tract that means different things to different people. Geographically, it constitutes the north-eastern extension of the central plateau of India, an area of upland that touches the five neighbouring states of Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar. Having the richest deposit of mineral wealth of the whole Indian sub-continent, the area is covered by an increasing number of open mines and industries and is known as 'the Ruhr' of India. Finally, the plateau is populated by a large number of tribal inhabitants and is therefore also defined as 'the Indian tribal belt'.

The Indian Constitution perpetuates the British categorisation of social groups. In particular, it defines criteria for the identification of so-called Scheduled Tribes (ST). In Jharkhand, Scheduled Tribes are largely concentrated in the districts of Ranchi, Santhal Parganas, and Singhbhum. Mundari-speaking tribes, which include Mundas and Hos - together with Santhals, Kharias, Birhors, and others - constitute the prevalent 'tribal' groups of the area.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Jharkhand' also designates a tribal political party, which will be extensively dealt with in the next chapters.

Map 1: The State of Jharkhand



Source:

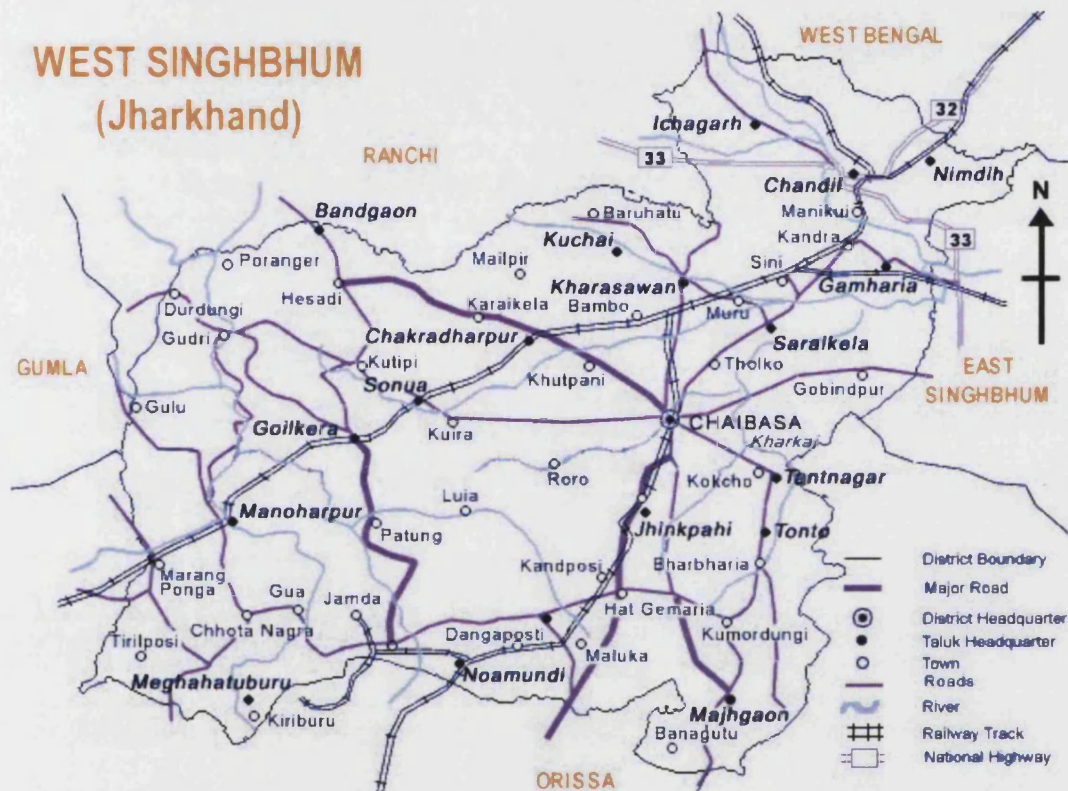
<http://www.thebharat.com/maps/jharkhand/html/jhdis/jhdistrict.html>

## The Mundari-speaking 'Tribes'

Historical and archaeological investigations show that Mundari-speaking tribes have inhabited the Chota Nagpur plateau for centuries. Although the location of their original homeland is controversial and in any case irrelevant to the present study, today they consider themselves to be autochthonous (*adivasi*: first inhabitants or 'sons of the soil') and to 'belong' to the plateau. Entering the plateau from the north, the Mundas first settled in the northwestern part of the Ranchi District, where they split into three different groups. The oldest branch, known as the *Mahali Munda* (also called *Khangar*, *Tamaria*, or *Marañ Munda*) moved to the eastern part of the District, and underwent a process of rajputization; i.e., they changed their status from tribe to Rajput caste. The youngest branch, known as the *Kompat Munda*, moved to the southern part of the District

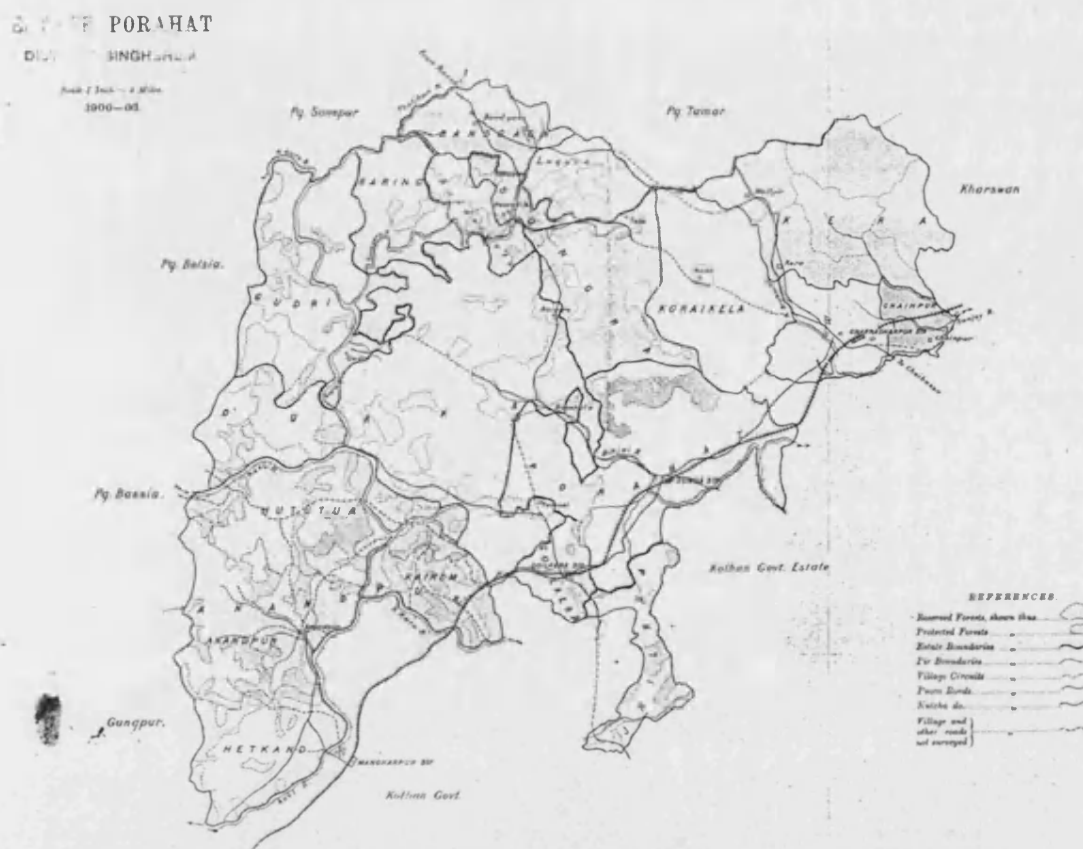
(what is now called the Sub-Division of Khunti). The Hos are those *Kompat* Munda who later migrated further south, into the area that is today called Singhbhum (Roy 1912).

**Map 2: West Singhbhum District**



Source: [www.thebharat.com/maps/jharkhand/html/jhdis/westsingh/westsingh.html](http://www.thebharat.com/maps/jharkhand/html/jhdis/westsingh/westsingh.html)

**Map 3: The Porahat Estate**



*Source: Taylor, J. H. 1904. Pir notes prepared during the settlement of the Porahat and subordinate estates, District Singhbhum, 1900-1903. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.*

### **Porahat area in Singhbhum district**

Situated in the south-eastern portion of the Chota Nagpur plateau, Singhbhum district spreads over an area of 13440 square kilometres, with a total population of 3,401,043 people.<sup>2</sup> British administrators once described the district as the 'Tibet of Chota Nagpur' because of its inaccessibility to the outsiders. At that time, it used to be a wild, rugged area walled in by a range of hills and covered by dense jungles. The district may now be divided into three main geographical landscapes: the comparatively level plains; the hills

<sup>2</sup> 1991 Census.

alternating with open valleys, and the steep forest-clad mountains.

The Porahat area is located in the northwestern part of the district. It connects West Singhbhum with the Khunti subdivision of Ranchi district and with its *Kompat* Munda population. The Porahat area is hilly, forested, and quite disconnected from the rest of the District. Porahat has a heterogeneous population of Hindu castes and 'tribal' communities like the Hos, Mundas, Salthals, and Birhors.<sup>3</sup> Migratory movements of the Porahat population can be reconstructed thanks to oral histories and some historical evidence. Both are contested. It seems however legitimate to affirm that some Hos migrated to Porahat from the deeply forested southern part, called Kolhan; some Hos and Mundas came from the north-eastern plains of the ex-princely states of Kharsawan and Seraikela, and that another group of Mundas migrated into the area directly from Ranchi district through the deep forests of the north.

A working hypothesis is that the Mundas who migrated from the north are the so-called *Kompat* Mundas; that the Hos from the south were 'originally' their offshoots; and that the Hos/Mundas who came from the north-western plains are one branch of the Mahali Mundas.

### **Dirih and Bhanjara villages and their inhabitants**

The fieldwork site lies in the heart of Porahat. It is not of easy access: it takes more than one day of walking to reach the first bus-stand, post office, or newsvendor, and more than four hours by motorcycle to reach the closest town. The absence of bridges to cross two rivers further isolates the field site during the rainy season. The construction of a dam in the seventies by the government has caused the formation of an artificial lake which has been eroding the tracks on its bank

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the use of terms like caste and tribe, see chapter Nine.

and, since these tracks are the only ones leading out of the forest, access to and from the valley is further constrained.

The two villages where I conducted fieldwork, Dirih and Bhanjara, are adjacent and separated only by a small stream and some rice-fields. Their population constitutes one single community with a common village headman and common ancestors. Nonetheless, the two villages fall under the jurisdiction of two different administrative units. Each village comprises 35-40 households and has a population of about 250 inhabitants, all of them being either Hos or Mundas.

In Porahat, people say that, 'in the past', Mundas and Hos used to constitute an endogamous group generally referred to as 'Ho-Munda' or 'forest people' (*buro hōko*), whatever their origin. They were considered of the same 'kind' as they used to freely intermarry, notwithstanding minor cultural or linguistic differences.

However, British settlement reports and census surveys transformed flexible cultural boundaries into rigid caste distinctions. In Porahat, four settlement reports and record-of-rights operations have been conducted: the first one in 1880, which shows all 'forest people' making their signature by drawing a bow and an arrow; the second one in 1903-7, where 'forest people' were indistinctly identified with the generic term of 'Kols' vis-à-vis the 'Rautias' (*Sing*) and the 'Gaur' (*Gowalla*); the third one in 1930-3, where the first distinctions between Hos and Mundas appeared; and finally in 1966, after Independence, where a third category 'Mundari' was introduced among the 'forest people'. Not only land records but also people confirmed that sometimes in the past some Ho-Mundas stopped 'dancing' (*gati*: to dance, to befriend) together, i.e., they stopped intermarrying and avoided commensality. And today they call 'strangers' their own 'brothers'.

These were the Mundas originally from the north-western plains. They embraced a process of Sanskritisation (adoption of values,



rites, and behaviours belonging to the Hindu tradition) which further encouraged the process of transformation of flexible cultural differences into caste boundaries. Their number in Porahat is quite small and they are mostly located in the two villages where I conducted fieldwork. To differentiate themselves and give primordial connotations to their social status claims, they started defining themselves as 'Mundari' vis-à-vis their Ho and Munda counterparts.

## **History of the two settlements and local conflicts**

First written mention of the two villages dates back to 1880s, to the time of the first Porahat survey and settlement operations.<sup>4</sup> On that occasion, Dirih had been registered as an offshoot of Bhanjara, which must then have been the original settlement. No mention was given about the identity of the original settlers of Bhanjara or about the period in which the village had been founded. However, British reports and correspondence related to those survey and settlement operations recorded a consistent migration of 'Kols' from the hilly northeastern regions to Porahat around the 1840's.

Moreover, documents belonging to the following survey operations, in the years 1903-7, recorded Buwe' Ho of the Soy clan as the founder of both villages.<sup>5</sup> Today's village-head, Rasai Mundari, my host during fieldwork, is a direct descendant of Buwe'. Oral histories say that members of the Soy clan had migrated from the village of Marań Segoe in the north-east to Sonua Block in Porahat, where they founded the village of Segoesai. From the same sources we learn that Buwe's father, Mora, had moved from Marań Segoe to Segoesai sometime during the end of the previous century.

The Village Notes of Segoesai from the following survey operations recorded Buwe' as being at that time old and ill,

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<sup>4</sup> Porahat Survey and Settlement Operations, 1880, Chaibasa District Record Room, Singhbhum District.

<sup>5</sup> Porahat Survey and Settlement Operations - Village Notes - 1906/7, Chaibasa District Record Room, Singhbhum District.



and Buwes' son, Jayram, as being around 60 years old. Hence, Jayram must have been born around the 1870's, and Buwe' around the 1850's. As Buwe' was born in Segoisai, Mora must have left Marań Segoe before that date. In other words, their migration appears to coincide with the more general migratory movements recorded in other documents.

Once Bhanjara was founded, other villagers were invited to settle from the west and northwest (mainly from Kharsawan). This is confirmed both by 1930 Village Notes of Segoisai and by oral histories.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, inhabitants of neighbouring villages also trace their distant origins back to that area.

In order to unravel the history and the dynamics of Dirih and Bhanjara's population, however, one has to widen the perspective and also look at the social composition of the surrounding area. British documents describe the people of Porahat in terms of two main groups, the Kols and the Rautias. We shall see how today the distinction has remained, though charged with additional dichotomous terminologies.

The Rautias were considered by the British as 'outsiders' invited to Porahat by local rajas who granted them land in exchange for their services as members of the warrior caste. According to the British, the Rautias were not 'aboriginal' as the Kols were. The Rautias originally belonged to a different place, spoke Hindi, and followed what they viewed as 'alien' religious and social customs.

Their history is related to that of the local royal dynasty, the Singhs of Porahat. Earliest mention of the Porahat royal family dates back to 1818, when Raja Gunsham Sing required the help of the British troops to:

*'Recover a portion of his authority over the extensive tracts occupied by the Lurkas, or Coles, who for the last fifty years had enjoyed perfect*

*independence and had thrown all appearances of subordination to the Rajah or other Chieftains of Singboom.'*<sup>7</sup>

In 1820, on payment of an annual sum of 101 Rupees, the British government took the Raja under its protection. In order to make that sum up, Major Roughsedge, Agent to the Governor General, made the Kols pay a tax (of eight annas) for the first time to the Raja. However:

*'the money was never paid [...] and from 1830 to 1836 the whole body of aboriginals resisted all attempts to realise rent, and waged war on the claimants [...] because of the attempt of the tenure-holder to destroy khuntkatti rights amongst them, through the imposition of the plough tax and the introduction of diku'<sup>8</sup> headmen'. (Macpherson 1908: 18).*

According to British documents and oral narratives, the Rautias had been introduced in Kol villages by the raja to act as headmen and extract tax payments. In exchange for their services, lands were granted to them:

*'when they [the Kols] would not pay the plough-tax in cash [...] he [the raja] called the Rautias, whose interference with khuntkatti [pioneering] rights roused the khuntkattidars [pioneers] to defend their rights'. (Macpherson 1908: 159)*

Major Roughsedge himself had made the Kols *'to allow persons of all castes to settle in their villages, and afford them protection, and encourage their children to learn the Orya and*

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> Porahat Survey and Settlement Operations - Village Notes - 1932, Chaibasa District Record Room, Singhbhum District.

<sup>7</sup> Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1820 F\4 800\21438 From Major Roughsedge Agent to the Governor General and to Mr. Secretary Metcalfe (9<sup>th</sup> May 1820).

<sup>8</sup> The term *diku* means 'outsider' or 'non-tribal'. Yet, it is a behavioural concept more than a primordial one. A *diku* is someone who allegedly acts against the interests of the tribals, so that even a tribal may become a *diku* if he behaves as such.

*Hindoo language*'.<sup>9</sup> However, some old Rautias would say they had been called directly by the Kols to deal on their behalf with the raja, as they could not speak Hindi and were fools (*dandi*).

Whatever the case, relations between the two groups appear to have been conflictual. At the time of the 1903-7 settlement operations, Rautia headmen held possession of seven villages, originally founded by Kols. Today, Rautias would claim the existence of old documents from the Rajas and copper plates that are buried under Kols' graveyards to indicate their precedence in the place and to testify to their rights over those villages.

During the 1903-7 settlement operations, the Kols filed petitions against the Rautias to claim the headmanship of their villages back and have their colonising rights recognised. Their attempts however failed. This was also the case of Bhanjara. Its headmanship had been transferred to a Rautia, Ganjam Singh, apparently on occasion of the 1880 settlement. The Village Notes of the following settlement operations (1906-7) record complaint about the allegedly illegitimate transfer of headmanship. The British officials further commented that:

*'the Ho khuntkattidars [original settlers] say that one of them should be Munda as it is against all rules that a man who does not cultivate in the village should be Munda', and even suspected 'a trick on his part'.*<sup>10</sup>

This statement implies that a village-head must be the 'owner of his land'. Nevertheless, the British eventually decided not to intervene and the headmanship of Bhanjara remained in Rautia hands.

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<sup>9</sup> Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1820 F\4 800\21438 From Major Roughsedge Agent to the Governor General and to Mr. Secretary Metcalfe (9<sup>th</sup> May 1820).

<sup>10</sup> A.N.Moberly, Village Notes of Bhanjara, 24/05/1904.

Today, Mundas explain those tricks by referring to their forefathers' foolishness and ignorance of Hindi. It appears to have been easy for the Rautias to persuade them that their taxes would have been increased had they declared themselves as *khuntkatti* during the settlement operations. The village of Bhanjara provides one such instance.

According to the Village Notes of 1903-7, Jayram Ho claimed first occupant's rights by affirming that his father Buwe' was the original founder of the settlement. Strangely enough, however, the same Jayram negated that same statement 23 years later when he affirmed that:

*'I cannot say who first settled in the village Dirih. In the last settlement, no one of this village has been recorded as [...] khuntkattidar'.<sup>11</sup>*

Jayram also filed a petition for having his name recorded as head of the village *'on the ground that [...] Bucha Singh (Rautia) does not live in the village and does not do his service properly'*. He did not claim *khuntkatti* rights.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the eighty-year-old grandson of Jayram, Rasai, claims to descend from the first founders of the village. All villagers agree with his version. His headmanship of both Dirih and Bhanjara is in fact undisputed. At the same time, however, he acknowledges the fact that neither he nor the other villagers are recorded as *khuntkatti*. He explains this contradiction by denigrating the ignorance of his ancestors and the treacherous nature of the neighbouring Rautias.

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<sup>11</sup> Insen, Village Notes of Dirih, 11.11.1930

<sup>12</sup> Petition 2/5 89 Chotanagpur Act - Budhu Munda of Village Bhanjara, Dodka Pir, Porahat, P.S. Manoharpur, Thana N.472, 22nd October 1932, Chaibasa Record Room, Singhbhum District.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **The people of Porahat**

#### **Introduction: a practice-based approach**

Since Weber's emphasis (1922) on shared elements (common descent, political memories, and cultural or physical traits) as the criteria defining 'ethnic groups' and Barth's focus (1969) on cultural practices, more recent debates have been revolving around the supposed dichotomy between primordial (Geertz 1963, Epstein 1978, Jacobson-Widding 1983) and behavioural (Cohen 1974, Brass 1974, Cohn 1987, Searle-Chatterjee, and Sharma 1994) notions of ethnicity as well as around attempts towards synthesis of the two approaches (Tambiah 1989, Brass 1991, Eriksen 1993, Jenkins 1994, Banks 1996).

In line with this third trend toward synthesis of the primordial and the behavioural, the present chapter provides ethnographic evidence of a case in which cultural attributes like language, locality, life-style, and religion are naturalised and considered as innate characteristics and historical legacies of particular social groups.

More specifically, the chapter will show how everyday practices and interactions as they are performed today and believed to have been performed in the past inform collective perceptions of ethnic identity. The approach followed is in line with other 'practice'-based approaches which look at how 'dispositions' are unconsciously inculcated and embedded through daily practices and engagements with the surrounding environment (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Ortner 1984). Ultimately, the chapter focuses on people's own perceptions and definitions of their 'kindness' (Astuti 1995).

As such, it will show how historical beliefs and perceptions of the past play a critical role in the construction of *us* vs. *them* boundaries and in the processing of 'cultural stuff' into primordial attributes. Ethnographic evidence will show how the concept of 'Munda-ness' is used as a means of inclusion and exclusion at different levels and that a major distinction is made between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group.' After examining the

way Mundas define themselves in relation to activities they perform and cultural traits they share, the chapter will analyse how they also define themselves in relation to the 'other,' the so-called *diku* or outsider. The dichotomy 'Munda-*diku*' is a cultural distinction that has overlain all political relations throughout their recorded history, and as such it is perceived as having biological grounds. In fact, it will be shown how the same category of 'the other' is based upon behavioural attributes.

### **'Forest people': Hos and Mundas**

British documents and oral histories show that Porahat was famous for its 'Ho-Munda' inhabitants. Hos and Mundas differ marginally in the pronunciation of language and in some cultural practices, yet they are commonly defined as 'forest people' (*Buru hōko*) and recognise themselves as the 'same kind of people' (*mied jàti hōko*). Villagers from neighbouring settlements confirm that Hos and Mundas living in Dirih and Bhanjara freely intermarry and 'eat together' (*jom-nu*), yet another way of expressing common kindness.

'Forest people' is the way local tribal people define themselves. Forest people are those members of the Munda and Ho caste who live in forested areas and whose subsistence depends upon hunting, the gathering of forest products, and the clearing of virgin forest for cultivation.

Forest people, it is said, 'cut trees and make rice' (*daru ma: ondo: baba-chauli hobaowa*). It is not only cultivation *per se*, but the transformation of forest into cultivable fields that really matters, i.e., that they see as their 'defining' activity.

Plate 1: Forest-cutting activities



Plate 2: 'Forest people' working in rice-fields



Members of other castes, like blacksmiths (*Lohars*), cattle-herders (*Goallas*) or basket makers (*Mahali*), whose principal activities are non-agricultural, do not cut down trees or prepare fields for

cultivation.<sup>13</sup>

Not only caste but also clan affiliations are associated with tree-cutting and field-making activities. The spiritual link between land and people is used as a criterion for social categorising. People say that by eradicating trees, they enter into contact with the spirits of a particular land and by worshipping them, they become spiritually connected to that land. By clearing different portions of forest, each clan encounters a different spirit and pays homage to it. Clan names are generally derived from particular circumstances characterising such encounters. Chapter Five explores the issue in greater detail.

### **A warrior caste: the Rautias**

At the time of the first Settlement Reports, Rautias were recorded as 'outsiders,' as they spoke Hindi and followed religious and social customs belonging to mainstream Hinduism. According to British officials, they were not 'aboriginal' as the Mundas were.

In line with this interpretation, Rautias claim today to be Suryavanshi Kshatriya.<sup>14</sup> Extremely proud of their warrior past, they talk at length about ancient battles their ancestors fought in an imprecise past all over Jharkhand.<sup>15</sup> Each lineage is in possession of an ancient sword worshipped at Dasshara, in identical fashion to the rituals performed by the members of the Seraikela and Kharsawan branch of the Porahat royal family.

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<sup>13</sup> In the rare cases of service castes possessing fields, these are prepared and given to them by the 'forest people' in exchange for services. Their possession can be revoked at any time and the fields ultimately belong to the Munda-Ho village community. There are however some cases, which I will illustrate later, of service castes who have left their 'traditional occupation' in order to clear tracts of forest and prepare their own fields for cultivation. Precisely because of that, people say they are 'becoming Buru-hoko' (*burohoko-tanako*). Moreover, they themselves claim to belong to Munda-Ho clans.

<sup>14</sup> It is my suggestion that they underwent a process of rajputization as they benefited locally from their special relations with the raja. The process of rajputization of once 'tribal' groups is very common especially in Jharkhand; see Sinha 1961.



While in other parts of Jharkhand, Rautias are considered and define themselves as members of a Scheduled Tribe, in Porahat, they never accepted such a definition. As one of them once affirmed: *'We are proud people, we were counted as OBC, and not as adivasi. We were once invited by Indira Gandhi and we told her so'*.

More generally, they emphasise their nature as 'outsiders' and proudly affirm that their home country is indeed distant Burma and 'certainly not Jharkhand'. They recount how from Burma their ancestors reached Ranchi district and were later invited to Porahat by the raja (Narpat Singh) to act as warriors and as tax collectors among the recalcitrant Mundas in exchange for land grants. For these services, they were made *thikadars* and were granted lands and headmanships of Munda villages. This gave rise to tensions between Mundas and Rautias, which today are still expressed by the same dichotomous idiom of insider vs. outsider.

Rautias generally show a higher standard of life than the Hos or the Mundas. Although they conduct agricultural activities, they do not clear forest for cultivation and will generally employ Mundas as wage labourers. They have *pakka* houses, shops (selling foodstuffs, kerosene, clothes) and permanent stalls ('hotel', teashops) at the local market, and one family even has a television and a generator. They are visibly much wealthier and wear trousers and shoes. The only grain mill machine belongs to one Rautia. It is the Rautias who act as traders buying forest products collected by the tribals and selling them to the nearest cities at a higher price. Most Rautias' courtyards are identified by tall red flags of Hanuman. They are perceived as 'Hindus' and as *diku* (outsiders). Most of them are supporters of the BJP vis-à-vis the tribal Jharkhand party.

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<sup>15</sup> This warrior tradition, which helps in legitimising their rajput status, is somehow counterposed to the fighting tradition of the Mundas. Yet, the former fight by being commissioned by others, whereas the Mundas fight to assert their own claims.

Plate 3: the Rautias of Porahat



Toward their Rautia neighbours, Mundas show an inferiority complex and sentiments of resentment, which, as we have seen, date back to ancient times. Yet, Mundas' resentments also derive from the social discrimination to which they are subjected by most Rautias and which, again, seems to be deeply rooted in the past. I remember Rasai explaining how Rautias did not allow their daughters to school as their teachers, mostly Mundas, would have 'touched' them when punishing them. Were this to happen, the children would have 'lost their caste' (*jati senotanae*:, the caste goes away).

The Rautia caste is divided into two sub-castes, the *Botgori* (big or higher sub-caste) and the *Chotgori* (small or lower sub-caste). Rautia women marrying Munda men are outcasted. When the opposite happens, however, Rautias will avoid eating and drinking from her hands and the man loses his Botgori (higher sub-caste) status and becomes a member of the Chotgori. This ideology is confirmed by mythological events describing the exceptionality of Munda men transforming into Rautias. As one of the narrations goes, a Munda was working as a servant in a Rautias' household. During a funeral ceremony, butter was missing and the servant promptly provided all guests with it. He then was made into a Rautia, to avoid guests 'losing their caste'.<sup>16</sup>

Today, some Mundas hardly accept and indeed resist these hierarchical relations. They say that Mundas are more educated than most of the Rautias, especially their female population. As we shall see in later chapters, Munda resistance took the form of conversion to a Hindu reformist movement to attain a purer ritual status. Indeed, they now adopt the same discriminatory values, norms, and codes of behaviour as the Rautias to display and affirm their own ritual and social superiority. I remember the Rautia marriage I attended with Rasai. When lunchtime arrived, people started sitting on their mats in different and separated lines, according to their caste

membership, making visible their social and ritual hierarchy. And that was also the time when Rasai strategically left the marriage party. As some Mundas later commented, '*Rasai did not eat Rautias' food. Our caste is bigger than theirs, as we do not even accept food from them*'.

## **Ho-Mundas and Rautias: sons of the soil versus outsiders**

'Forest people' are those 'who cut trees and make rice'. By transforming virgin forest into cultivable fields, they 'colonise' the territory (*disumtanako*). Colonising activities legitimise their presence in the territory and control over natural resources. In the political platform, this concept finds its expression in the term *adivasi*. The term has deep political and social implications for the Mundas of Porahat. Coined for the first time by Jaipal Singh, the founder of the Jharkhand Movement in 1931 (see Chapter Five), the term is associated with tribals' fights against land and forest dispossession.

In Porahat, *adivasis* are those people who: (a) clear virgin forest for cultivation; (b) work in fields that they or their ancestors have prepared; and (c) have clan graveyards. Generally, however, people define *adivasis* by referring to its conceptual opposite, *diku*. A *diku* is an outsider, someone who does not belong to the 'land of the forest' (*buru disum*), who does not speak a tribal language, and does not have a clan graveyard. *Dikus* live in cities, in the 'land of the plains' (*pī disum*), go to school, can read and write, wear spectacles and speak the Hindi language. Indeed, people always shift from their Mundari language to Hindi when talking about them. People from northern Bihar or other parts of India are by default *diku*, as all north Bihar is perceived as lacking forests and having big cities and 'high buildings' instead.

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<sup>16</sup> A similar narrative regards a *Lohar* (ironsmith) boy who was again working as servant in a Rautia house. He, together with the son of his master, ate some honey in the forest, and the master had no other choice but to transform him into a Rautia to avoid his son's loss of caste.

The Mundas adhere to the stereotype of themselves as simple, honest, and naive. Conversely, they perceive *dikus* as greedy (*jombui*) and cunning. They repeatedly told me that *dikus* cheat, take advantage of, and disrespect tribal people: '*Dikus suck Mundas' blood and steal from us*' was the almost stereotypical description of the nature of *adivasis-diku* relations.

Government officials are *dikus* by definition. They are highly mistrusted and feared by the Mundas, sentiments clearly shown by the following opinions:

*'Block Development Officers assign some work to tribal thikadars. Some money is given to them in advance while the rest is given when the work is finished, when the BDO testifies with a 'certificate' that the work was completed properly. Yet, for issuing this 'certificate', the BDO usually asks for a bribe. If the thikadar pays the bribe, he won't have enough money left to pay the labourers and the work will eventually remain incomplete. On the other hand, if the bribe is not paid, the certificate will never be issued, and he will have to give all the initial money back. This is what happened to ...: the certificate was not issued, even if the bridge had been properly completed, and he still has to give Rs.35.000 back to the BDO. In the worst cases, people are sent to prison, like what happened to ... or they are even killed. We have no way out, except refusing development plans. I was offered the chance of fixing the well of our village, but I decided not to take advantage of that'.<sup>17</sup>*

Just as the informant refused to fix the well with public money, another informant stated he stopped applying for special

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<sup>17</sup> In this chapter, informants' names are purposely not reported.

grants as he always ended up losing money and being cheated. He then provided one instance. In 1988, a grant was offered by the BDO, by which goats worth Rs 1500 plus another Rs 1500 in money were destined for the tribal people. The money was given free of interest, but the value of goats was to be given back with interest. Tribal people did not receive the money though they did receive eleven goats each. The latter, however, all died soon after reaching the place. Although they sent an application to the BDO informing him about the death of the animals, the BDO still demanded from them the payment of the money for the goats plus the interest, the total of which amounted to Rs.3600 on May 1999. The informant told me his family couldn't afford paying back the money (they had never received), added that they had been cheated because they were young at the time, and concluded with the cry: '*Jai Jharkhand!*'

For the most politicised, all non-*adivasis* are by definition *dikus*. Everyday practices however disprove this apparently straightforward and dichotomous scenario. Indeed, the social scenario is characterised by different degrees of 'other-ness'. Members of neighbouring service castes who had been invited by the Mundas to settle in their villages to assist them in their agricultural activities, are generally not perceived as *dikus* but simply 'people from different villages' (*eta-haturenko*). Yet, they do not cut trees and do not have graveyards. Hence, they are not *adivasi* either.

Indeed, their status is quite flexible and varies according to the circumstances. The more they develop interdependent economic and ritual relations with the Hos, the 'less' *diku* they are. I recorded many instances of members of service castes who transformed into 'forest people' by conducting typical Munda activities and adopting Munda clan names. By 'cutting down trees and making rice', by worshipping Munda spirits and by contributing to Munda festivals, they legitimise their presence in the territory and eventually acquire the right of being buried in those lands. Customarily, the adoption

of Munda clan names and the development of clan graveyards are perceived as securing land inheritance rights.

Contractors, traders, officials are those *dikus* with whom tribals normally interact.<sup>18</sup> As the Mundas often point out, these groups could never become *adivasis*. This perception, however, appears to derive more from the lack of precedents.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, according to some of my informants, anybody can become *diku*. As the category appears to have a behavioural rather than primordial connotation, people can lose their *adivasi*-ness and 'become one of them' (*diku:e baiotana*). Those who leave their villages and migrate to cities for seasonal or permanent work do indeed become *diku* if they do not come back for festivals and main ceremonies. What is needed is knowledge and 'way of thinking' (*diku uru:*).

The transformation of Mundas into *diku* is attributed to trickery on the parts of non-tribals:

*'BDOs do not know about the area, do not even know our village names. When they are tribals, they either behave as diku, or they are killed. This is for example the case of the previous BDO of ... block. He was pushed into a well and was drowned. They are a small minority surrounded by dikus and tricks are played on them. When adivasis pass governmental examinations and get jobs in government, dikus will disturb their work, so that they will either be quickly sent away, or they cannot do anything to change the situation anyway.'*

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<sup>18</sup> Government officials are the *dikus par excellence*.

<sup>19</sup> As the first example of a *diku* behaving like an *adivasi* I did gradually become one of them. Initially addressed as *diku*, people then shifted to 'white woman' (*pundi mai*) after the first months of fieldwork. At first extremely suspicious about my presence amongst them, they later realised my goodwill and what was left of my *diku*-ness was physical only. They ended up calling me *mai*, i.e. younger sister. Eventually, old women start making jokes about their nephews getting married to me: in their opinion, by living there, my hair and skin colour were becoming darker, my Munda language was progressing, and I was indeed learning how to live in the jungle. But most of all, I ate their 'brown' rice, drank rice-beer, and learnt how to dance their songs, activities which distinguished Mundas from non-Mundas. In a way, I was becoming an *adivasi*.

*Adivasi BDOs do not ask for bribes themselves, but other head clerks ask for them'.*

In general, misbehaviour against Ho fellows is perceived as an indication of a changed nature. The most 'popular' and recurrent narrative regarded a tribal manager of a local Gramin Bank who allegedly cheated Dirih villagers in 1995. At that time, the BDO offered a grant of Rs. 6000 to Mundas living in ... Block:

*'[...] Yet, of those Rs.6000, I was given Rs.4000 in the form of two cows, through the Gramin Bank of ... village. I received the cows. The remaining Rs.2000 I never received. Soon after, one cow died. I wrote an application for it, but till today I had no answer. When I went to the bank to receive the cheque for the remaining Rs.2000, the bank manager advised me not to take the cash but to open an account and keep the money in the bank to gain interest. Yet, he made me sign the wrong application. When, after some time, I went to the bank to cash my money, I was told he had taken that money already. I then went to talk to the village headman and to the teachers, yet with no results. Nobody could do anything. We threatened physically the bank manager who eventually was transferred'.*

Nine other inhabitants of Dirih and Bhanjara told me they were cheated in exactly the same way.



## **Chapter Three:**

### **The social organisation and reproduction of the Mundas**

#### **Introduction**

The present chapter deals with the social organisation and reproduction of the Mundas. It first outlines the main social categories - clan, *khunt*, house, brotherhood - and then analyses the processual nature of kinship and the modality by which affinity transforms into consanguinity. In so doing, the chapter identifies marital life, the performance of main rites of passage, rice-processing activities and the placing of the dead as producers of clan membership. In-marrying women are particularly dealt with as they exemplify such transformations.

Second, the chapter looks at how ancestors are selected to control fertility and to symbolically attain the social reproduction of clans. A symbolic reading of the role played by ancestors is followed by an investigation of the process of soul selection. Next, the chapter provides ethnographic details of the 'Calling-back' (*Keya ader*) ceremony, whereby good souls are ritually 'called back' from the graveyard inside the kitchen to join the community of dead members of the clan. Kitchens and graveyards constitute the sacred places where the transformation of affinity into consanguinity is completed.

#### **Social organization**

##### **Clan**

The Mundas are segmented into exogamous corporate descent-based groups or clans, locally known as *kili*. Clans constitute the most relevant social category. Clan members share putative ancestors, places of origin, and clan worship. In Dirih-Bhanjara, the following ten clans are present: Soy, Hembrom,

Hasda, Bandra, Samad, Bankira, Pareya, Gagrai, Bandya, and Jamuda. The same clans are also scattered throughout Jharkhand and parts of Northern Orissa.

Clans are distinguished into 'brothers' or 'agnates' (*haga*) and 'guests' or 'affines' (*kupul*). Only members of 'guest' clans can intermarry as marriage among agnates is perceived as an aberration and punished with outcasting if not with death.

'Brother' clans are known by heart 'as they were taught by the elders'. People list 'brother' clans without hesitation. In contrast, to identify their 'guest' clans, they first check the existence of intermarriages, and only then 'state' the nature of their relationship with a certain clan. Affinal relations are always 'in the making'. As long as a clan is not known to be 'brother', it is likely to become 'guest' by the starting of new marriage relations<sup>20</sup>.

Besides 'guest' and brother' categories, each clan is ritually distinguished into two sections: the *Tiu* (rice that was boiled before being husked) people and the *Adwa* (un-boiled rice) people. Today, these distinctions appear not to have any relevant social effect. Only old people recall them and even they are unable to further explain their value or origin. Some hierarchy appears to be involved, but this is highly contested.

Clans are further distinguished into 'big' (*marañ*) and 'small' (*huriñ*) sections. The distinction is generally explained by the relative age of two pioneering brothers (clan's ancestors) or by their precedence in the village. A recurrent account of sets of brothers founding a village and eventually dispersing geographically refers to the fact that a younger brother should never see his elder brother's wife while she is taking a bath,

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<sup>20</sup> Together with Parry, I too disagree with what he defined as a 'substantialist fallacy,' i.e., with 'those authors [who] seem to imagine that we can discover alliance groups which exist as substantial entities and which we can count' (1979:281). In contrast, among the Mundas, alliance groups are always latent and in the making, so that their actual affinal nature ultimately depends on the existence of past or present intermarriages.

hence the need for him to eventually settle down elsewhere. It is, in other words, a differentiation between older and younger branches of clans, which in some cases appears to entail hierarchical relations. Whether the two kinds of distinctions, i.e., the ritual and the territorial, are connected, I was not able to ascertain.

### **Khunt or bonso**

The term 'khunt' or 'bonso' (from Hindu: *vans*; Sanskrit: *vansa*) indicates lines of patrilineal descent from a common and unknown ancestor. However, it was rarely used, and either as an equivalent of *vamsavali* (Hindi: genealogy) or in reference to the two 'relevant' lines of descent among the Mundas (those of the village-head and the head of village confederations)<sup>21</sup>. A *bonso* then identifies lines of descent rather than particular individuals. In the latter case, people would rather use the term 'house'.

### **House, family**

The term 'house' (*owa*: house, family, household) indicates what anthropologists would conventionally define as a 'maximal lineage', that is, the most extensive group of agnates between whom precise genealogical links can be traced (Parry 1979:136). People generally trace their forefathers back to the fifth or sixth generation. Remembered ancestors constitute the 'inhabitants of X's house'<sup>22</sup>. They comprise the original couple - dead or alive - plus its offshoots.

To be more precise, the expression excludes married sons, who, after marriage, have left their parents' house, but includes the youngest son and his family, as they as a rule reside in their parents' house and will eventually inherit it. In other words, with the death of the original couple, the house still includes the man's ancestors, his wife, and those descendants

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<sup>21</sup> Both positions are transmitted from father to son.

of theirs who still live in the house, yet at the same time excludes other members of the parents' generation as well as the man's brothers.

The category is however flexible, so that the actual offshoots included or excluded do vary according to the context. According to the generation to which one refers, the category identifies either maximal lineages or simply families. What appears to be a common pattern, however, is the exclusion of out-marrying women, except when they come back because of divorce or widowing. As for in-marrying women, their position is ambiguous. As we shall see below, older in-marrying women with children tend to be more frequently included in the category. Dead wives who have been made into ancestors are also included.

### **Brotherhood**

'Brothers' are members of the same clan or members of 'brother' clans. More generally, 'brothers' share a common ancestor, common worship, and a common 'substance', which is renewed at every communal feast, and which prescribes exogamy among them. Ultimately, the category refers to a primordial essence, whatever the layers of relatedness according to the context - house, clan, caste, village -. What is constant is the putative agnatic link that groups all 'brothers' together.

The category 'brothers' has a counterpart in the category 'Eat-drink' (*jom-nu*). However, the latter stresses behaviour rather than birth. The category identifies 'Those who eat and drink together' as being related to one another. Indeed, the two categories mirror one another, with the former emphasising descent - or relatedness from blood, and the latter alliance - or relatedness from food. As a social category, 'those who eat and drink together' too varies according to the context and is used as a marker of 'common kind'. Whoever 'the other' is, the

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<sup>22</sup> This quite unusual knowledge can probably be explained by the fact that social memory of one's ancestors is necessary to claim ancestral land. Ancestors' names are generally known by heart. They are 'listed' during

expression is used to emphasise a difference between 'us' and 'them'. Be it used in relation to caste, clan, or household membership, the category is used as an idiom for social discrimination.

While commensality derives from relatedness, it also appears from my data that the act of eating and drinking together (especially rice-beer) does in fact 'create' relatedness as much as it simply reflects it (see for example Carsten 2000). A woman's gradual incorporation into her husband's clan also derives from the act of eating with him day after day, until she becomes an agnate. In the case of inter-caste relations, the danger deriving from commensality with other caste members is a well-documented fact. I remember being told not to eat together with the Birhors, a much stigmatised group of hunters and gatherers, to avoid 'becoming one of them'! More generally, people indicated that commensality with members of other castes as a cause for caste change.

Munda ethnographers generally talk about marriageable and unmarried clans in terms of clan exogamy, but to my knowledge, the issue of 'brotherhood' (clusters of 'brother' clans) has not been addressed. In contrast, my data show that people talk about exogamy in terms of 'brotherhood' rather than in terms of clans. This 'confusion' probably arises from the fact that Mundas simply proscribe marriage with one's own 'brothers', meaning both clan fellows (hence the argument of clan exogamy) and members of different, yet 'brother' clans.

Munda 'brotherhoods' are composed by agnates only, with affines being excluded by definition. As such, they differ from those following the endogamic rule, as reported by other northern Indian ethnographers. *Biradari* (brotherhood, sub-caste) endogamy was, for instance, observed by Parry among Kangra Rajputs, among whom clans belonging to a common *biradari* do normally exchange their women (Parry 1979). Along the same lines, Mayer suggested that for the people of Malwa in Madhya

Pradesh the term *biradari* signifies either a caste or a sub-caste, according to the context, with endogamy being implied in both cases (1965:152).

## **Social reproduction**

### **The making of a social person**

As in Hindu society in general, clan membership among the Mundas depends upon and derives from the performance of main rites of passage. The following are the most important rites of passage: the 'Hair-cutting' (*Narta*) and the 'Name-giving' (*Saki*) ceremonies, which introduce new-born children into the clan for the first time; the 'Ear-piercing' (*Tukui Lutur*) ceremony, by which young clan members have their ears ritually pierced by their mother's brothers during their childhood or puberty; marriage (*andi*), which transforms teenagers into adults of their clans and, finally, the 'Placing of the burial stone' (*Diri-em*) ceremony, which signs the 'social death' of a clan member, with inheritance officially distributed only after its performance, even years after death.

All these ceremonies are connected: in order to get officially married, a man must have had his ears ritually pierced, and in case his parents are dead he must have ritually placed a stone on their graves. He must, in other words, have behaved as a clan member.

### ***Birth: The 'Name-giving' ceremony***

The 'Name-giving' ceremony initiates the newborn into social life, as it makes an infant into a clan member. On that occasion, he/she acquires individuality by being 'assigned' a soul. This soul is usually chosen from those of other lineage members. In so doing, the continuity of the clan is perpetuated.

After a new-born baby has undergone the Narta ceremony, by which he/she is purified from the polluting process of birth, he/she is given a name. Names act as vehicles of souls, which are represented during the ritual by a grain of rice dropped into a small pot of water. A leaf, which stands for the child, floats on the surface of the water. The grain is dropped into the water and associated with a particular name, vehicle of a particular soul. The name is repeated aloud many times, until the leaf touches the grain. Each grain is left floating for a minute or so. If the leaf does not touch the grain in the meanwhile, a different name is suggested and a new grain is dropped on the water. Different participants suggest different names, in turn.

Notwithstanding the apparently random and fortuitous nature of the name-giving process, it is a fact that children are usually named after their grandparents, be they alive or dead. These names are in fact obsessively repeated until the grain and the leaf eventually meet. The touching of the grain and the leaf is a signal that the child has finally 'chosen' the name. Often, however, leaf and grain never meet. In those cases, the name is assigned by simply anointing the child's head.

Souls arrive with one's name. And it is close relatives who assign names. On the one hand, the name-giving process appears to be in control of the participants, who select the most suitable names for the child. On the other hand, when the leaf and the rice grain do not meet, people comment that 'the child does not like the name'. Eventually, as they see it, it is the child who 'decides' whether he/she likes the name or not. By disliking a name, the child in fact dislikes the soul of that particular person. I remember the embarrassment of those people whose name were continuously 'refused' by the child! This however does not prevent the name-giver assigning a name to the 'recalcitrant' child, by anointing with oil the head of the child and putting a thread around his/her hips.

Name-givers, name-takers, and the very process of 'giving a name' are expressed with the same term *saki*. New-born babies are named after selected people in the hope that name-giver and name-taker will share personality, physical appearance, and destiny. Thus, names are conceptualised as vehicles of human characteristics. They constitute the 'official names' and are used in everyday life only rarely, as they act as excellent vehicles for malevolent spirits to reach the name-bearer<sup>23</sup>.

'The soul of a learned man will make you learn quickly' said Rasai, in an effort to 'persuade' his three weeks-old nephew to choose his own name during his ceremony. The baby eventually refused all the proposed names and after some perplexity people soon found numerous 'obvious' reasons for the child's refusal. After three days, during which no mention at all was made of the issue, his grandfather casually anointed the infant's head with oil while mentioning his own name aloud. By not crying while being anointed, the child was said to have accepted the proposed name. Soon after, Rasai invited me to mention my boyfriend's name, Lorenzo, while again anointing the child's head<sup>24</sup>. Whereas the official name remains that of his grandfather, the newborn's everyday name is indeed 'Lorenzo'.

***Marriage: bride price, the 'Crossing Clan' ceremony, and 'doing the clan'***

Beyond the name-giving ceremony, it is marriage, which provides clan-hood. Girls and boys are not perceived as full and complete persons until they get married. Being particularly vulnerable to negative energies and not having contributed to the social reproduction of the clan, their clan-hood is only latent.

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<sup>23</sup> Alternative names are unofficially given to children soon after the name-giving ceremony. Moreover, children themselves usually chose other names for themselves, either a nickname or more usually a Hindi one, when they attend schools outside the village. In general, there is a tendency to call people by their kin relations, and married women by their village of origin.

<sup>24</sup> When my boyfriend eventually came to visit me some months afterwards, people noticed similarities between the two *saki*, and kept on commenting on the fairness of the child's skin and his strong constitution, 'just like his name-giver!'



For this reason, unmarried men and women are not held accountable for breaching clan's rules and are allowed to behave in ways severely condemned in adults. As teenagers put it: 'maidens and bachelors do not know [ada], only men and women know'<sup>25</sup>. This is illustrated in the manner in which nineteen-year-old Haris used to come and eat rice in my house almost every day until the day he got married. Thereafter, he stopped accepting rice from me and, one day, he confessed to me that because he had 'married', he was supposed to behave as a man, i.e., to follow his society's rules. It is marriage that makes bachelors (*seped*) into men (*kowa*) and maidens (*hapanum*) into women (*kui*).

### *Bride-Price*

To produce clan-hood, marriages must be properly celebrated, i.e., they must be sanctioned by the payment of bride price. As a matter of fact, the absence of a legitimised union threatens the social reproduction of the clan. Bride price is a prerequisite for a couple and its children to have their other rites of passage performed. Moreover, its payment allows for sons to be recognised as legitimate clan members and inherit their father's land. This fact is easily explained: when bride price is not paid, the bride's parents can claim a right to their daughter's offspring. Bride price then acts as a guarantee for the husband's lineage's rights in a woman's procreative powers. Finally, a man for whose wife a price was not paid, is prevented from becoming an ancestor and joining

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<sup>25</sup> *Hapanumko ondo: sepedko kako adana, kowako ondo: kuiko sumenko adana.* The verb 'to know' is translated in Mundari language by the two terms *ada* and *eto*. The former refers to a more embodied knowledge, that of the ancestors, which is a sign of wisdom and cannot be learnt. By contrast, *eto* refers to an external knowledge which derives from experience. Somehow, then, what married people 'know' with respect to what unmarried people 'do not know' does not come from a process of learning: it is a kind of embodied knowledge which depends upon and is activated by the different life stages. The difference from *ada* and *eto* does not seem to be analogous to the one identified by Giddens between practical knowledge (what one knows) and discursive knowledge (what one is able to express as knowledge). Whereas Giddens stresses the difference between *kinds* of knowledge, Mundas appear to emphasise differences in the *sources* of knowledge (Giddens 1984).

the community of dead clan members. With death, he will be socially forgotten.

### *The Crossing-Clan Ceremony*

Clan membership starts in the kitchen, where new brides ritually change clan affiliation and behave as new clan members. Brides leave their father's clan to be adopted by their husbands' during the 'Crossing clan' ceremony (*Kili talla*: to cross clan) performed in the kitchen. The ceremony mainly consists of the 'Cook and eat' (*jom-isin*: to cook and eat) and the 'Rice-pot touching' (*mandi chatu sab*: to touch the rice-pot) rituals. During those rituals, new brides cook rice in their husband's kitchen for the first time and offer it to living and dead members of the clan. In sum, at marriage, brides are initiated into their new clan, the kitchen and the *owa bongako* (spirits of the house). By ritually entering the kitchen, brides acquire the right of becoming ancestors and being buried in the graveyard of their husbands' clan. As long as they remain married, they will not worship their father's ancestors.

All non-household members are excluded from the kitchen. In practice, however, it is non-clan members who are absolutely excluded. Hence, the kitchen becomes the place where clan membership is made apparent and visible.

### *'Doing the Clan': Marital Life, Rituals, Locality, and House Construction*

Rather than simply the ceremony of marriage, however, it is actual marital life that produces clan membership. For men, marital life strengthens membership to their birth clan. By contrast, for a woman, marital life weakens her affiliation to it while simultaneously reinforcing that of her husband's clan.

Among some groups of northern India, in-marrying women become agnates to their in-laws 'literally in the span of a few hours' after marriage, even though 'a woman's initial status as an incoming wife, however, never quite disappears.' (Madan 1993:

291) In contrast, among the Mundas, marriage by itself does not imply any immediate change in women's clan affiliation. Rather, it is a gradual process in which women actively engage throughout their marital lives<sup>26</sup>. As other ethnographers have put it, (Chatterje and Das 1927:27; Bouez 1985:71, 127) they are neither part of their natal clan nor their husbands. The more a woman contributes to the social reproduction of her husband's clan, the more she becomes a member of it. Giving birth to children, making rice-beer, worshipping clan ancestors, cooking rice in the hearth of the house, working in the fields and rice-processing activities, make a woman into a clan member. As people say, by 'growing old' into their husbands' houses, wives gradually transform into 'brothers'. The process finds its completion/realisation only at death. As we shall see later on, the placing of the dead represents the final statement of the deceased's clan affiliation.

Srinivas described a similar scenario among the Coorgs of Mysore: 'the granting of rights to the bride in the groom's okka [house, family] is accompanied by the severance of her connection with her natal okka. But such severance is not complete and irrevocable. The entire process is symbolised in the transference of twelve pebbles from the bride's natal okka to her conjugal okka [...] she has also the right to be buried after death in its burial-ground' (1952:53). And again: 'It takes a long time for her [a bride] to be accepted into her conjugal okka: only when her children are grown up does she have the assured sense of belonging to her conjugal okka' (1952:125). And indeed, of the twelve pebbles, eleven only are transferred to the groom's family friend at marriage time. Her native family retains one pebble as she retains some rights in her original okka<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Maya Unitthan-Kumar recorded a similar phenomenon among Garasia women of Rajasthan, whereby 'wives are in fact not considered full members of either their natal group or their affinal group.' However, she also stated that 'Girasia wives do not become structurally more incorporated into their husbands group as they grow older' (Unitthan-Kumar 1991) whereas we shall see how the contrary is true among the Mundas.

<sup>27</sup> It would be interesting to learn what happens with the twelvth peddle after the woman's death.

Clan membership requires a real engagement in the present. Even linguistically, clan membership is expressed in terms of 'doing the clan' and not in terms of 'being' or 'belonging' to it<sup>28</sup>. Clan membership is something people actively construct, perform, and engage with during their whole life-time by addressing their kin with the appropriate terms, by paying respect to clan elders, by performing certain duties and obligations, by working in ancestral fields, by not marrying inside one's own clan, and so on. An essential behaviour for not being deprived of one's clan membership, hence for reaffirming it, is clan exogamy. Indeed, when the exogamic rule is not followed, the couple is normally expelled from the village, and their life threatened. Parents will pay a fine in order not to be expelled, too, and they talk about their son or daughter as having been 'left' or 'abandoned' (*bage*) by the other clan members. To be 'left' equals social death.

Locality also appears to play a major role in producing kinship. As Lambert suggested, locality is expressed in the social construction of kinship. Her ethnographic account from Rajasthan shows how in-marrying women create fictive kinship relations by transforming affinal relations into consanguineous ones (1996:113). Similarly Vatuk observed in-marrying women calling one another 'sisters' just as their husbands call one another 'brothers' in urban Northern India (1969:266). The present study, although not dealing with relations between women in particular, similarly shows how locality creates consanguinity: by living in their husbands' villages, wives do transform into 'brothers'. Srinivas observed (1952:125 n1) that this process of incorporation into their husband's clan is made easier by cross-cousin marriages. Mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-laws use consanguineous rather than affinal terms to address one another. The next chapter will indeed show how cross-cousin unions represent the Mundas' preferential marital patterns.

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<sup>28</sup> It would be interesting to learn what happens with the twelvth peddle after the woman's death.

The construction of a house by the couple parallels the consolidation of one's clan affiliation through marital life. The identity between house construction and contribution to social reproduction is attained also linguistically, with the term *owa* being used also to define 'family' or very localised descent groups, as we saw previously. This is a common element throughout India<sup>29</sup>. The building of a separate house for the couple comes only with children, i.e., when some stability is given to the union. Without children, couples have not and are not a 'house' yet and either live with the parents or in huts. With the first child, the hut starts being covered by mud and stones and slowly becomes an *owa*<sup>30</sup>.

To transform the initial hut into a house, a proper kitchen (*adiñ*) must replace the fireplace. In there, rice is stored and ancestors worshipped. The couple's rice is stored separately from the rice belonging to the husband's parents. As a custom, rice bundles can only be kept in the kitchen, where 'house' members only can enter, and should not be seen by anybody else. As such, 'real' walls are needed where intrusive eyes cannot filter through. For the same reason, I was often told, houses have no windows. Moreover, eyesight is considered a vehicle for sorcery as powerful as poison is. People emphasise the fact that without a kitchen of their own, men cannot worship their ancestors<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, with the kitchen, the 'blessing' of the ancestors also comes. There are instances of unmarried men still living in their parents' or brothers' house, who are often victims of jokes not only for their bachelor status, but because they cannot worship on their own.

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<sup>29</sup> Among others, see the Nayars' *taravad*, the Coorgs' *Okka* and Vitu in Tamilnadu. Similarly, non-Indian ethnographers record same terms for 'house' and 'lineage,' as among the Tallensi (Fortes 1949:10) and the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940:195).

<sup>30</sup> A similar phenomenon was recorded by M.Bloch among the Zafimaniry, whereby the different stages of house construction correspond to the continuation of the process of marriage (Bloch 1995).

<sup>31</sup> The association between house and ancestors is also made evident by the fact that all those rituals that imply animal sacrifices are performed by drawing a 'house' (*bonga owa*) on the floor of the courtyard and some spots inside it to represent the ancestors. Eventually, all offerings are placed inside the boundaries of the 'house'.

In sum, the solidification of a new house parallels the consolidation of the couple living in it, which is commonly rendered in terms of having children and eating rice grown, stored, and cooked independently from the parents' house<sup>32</sup>.

### **The Case of Manoj Soy and Dukhan Soy**

The case of Manoj Soy is instructive. A thirty-year old married man, Manoj still lives with his parents as he is childless. Because of the unhappy relations between Manoj's wife and his mother, however, the couple eventually built a small hut on one side of the house, where they sleep but never cook rice. Notwithstanding their mature age, their long-standing marriage and the fact that Manoj's father is one of the richest men of the village, their hut is made of wood and has no kitchen, just a small fireplace in the corner. As they told me, they will have their own house only when a child arrives. In the meantime, they eat in their parents' house, where Manoj cannot worship the ancestors.

Dukhan Soy, an unmarried young man provides another instance. Although he lives on his own, he cannot worship his ancestors. As his father once told me, Dukhan can perform no ancestor worship in his hut until he has a wife and the hut starts becoming a 'proper' house<sup>33</sup>.

Rice-processing activities provide clan-hood, too. It soon became clear to me that my contribution to those activities was unwelcome in 'my house' not (only) because of my evident inability to perform them, but because their performance was somehow interpreted as competitive with respect to the in-married woman of the house. I clearly remember old women passing by while I was spreading the paddy in the courtyard to let it dry, and commenting about the fact that I was behaving

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<sup>32</sup> This relation between birth and rice is also made linguistically, as the same term (*bui*) indicates both the navel and the centremost part of the top of a paddy bundle where the straw rope terminates. A newborn baby ritually enters the kitchen for the first time only after his umbilical cord has dried and his navel is 'ready.' In the same line, paddy bundles ritually enter the kitchen only after they have been 'closed,' i.e., when the *bui* is closed on top of them.

as a wife. All my explanations about my academic ambitions remained unheard, and only my later 'allergy' towards rice-processing activities made it clear to everybody that I was not in fact trying to marry my host! I then understood that because rice-processing activities give clan-hood, I was behaving as in-married women do after their marriage.

The preparation of rice-beer (*dyang*) is another example of clanhood-producing activity: only married women are supposed to prepare it, and married men should never drink rice-beer prepared and offered by a married woman from a different clan. Only after my boyfriend had come to visit me I was eventually taught how to prepare rice-beer, despite the fact that I had been asking to be taught how to prepare it since my first days in the field. Rice-beer represents one of the strongest symbols of sexual intercourse and social reproduction. A very complex set of rules guides the offering of rice-beer even among clan members. This basically reflects avoidance and joking relations. I clearly realised how much of an outsider I still was, as my host never drank my rice-beer: after all, I was not one of them, and that behaviour would have been read as deviant by others. I also remember the women of my neighbourhood curiously asking me if Virendra had in fact drunk it or not, making the sexual implications indeed quite obvious.

The use of teknonymy in the village provides further evidence that adulthood and clan membership depends upon marriage, locality, and the production of children - for men and women alike. Married women are addressed with the name of their native village<sup>34</sup>. With their first child, however, they are identified as mothers of their offspring and addressed as 'X's

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<sup>33</sup> Worship depends on having a wife and one child at least.

<sup>34</sup> This differs from what Mayer reported when he said that married men 'hesitate to tell the name of their wife's village' (1965:226). However, Lambert (1997:119), Jacobson (1977:275) and Vatuk (1992:82) report opposite evidence from Central and Northern India.

mother', i.e., they start becoming 'insiders' for the first time<sup>35</sup>.

### ***Death: Burial in the Graveyard***

The placing of the dead is another activity that produces clan affiliation. This is particularly evident in the case of in-marrying women. As we saw before, women move into their husband's village and replace their natural clan membership with that of their husbands. They enter their new house as affines and gradually, in the span of their lifetime, and by growing old in their husband's household, they become 'agnates', a process completed at death<sup>36</sup>. The placing of the dead within the boundaries of graveyards transforms wives into full members of their husband's clan for the first time and hence brings women's affiliation to a completion. In other words, burial within graveyard's boundaries eventually transforms affinity into consanguinity.

As people frequently point out, only 'brothers' are buried in the graveyard, as that 'is not a place for guests'. I remember my perplexity when, during the funerary rituals of an in-marrying woman, I was told that in fact she was a 'brother'. It was explained that she had lived 'in the house' for such a long time that she had become a 'brother'.

The following chapters will show how the same principle applies to other caste members. The burial of non-Munda women within their husband's graveyard provides their children with full Munda status and full inheritance rights.

In sum, for the Mundas, death plays the same fundamental role

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<sup>35</sup> Similarly to what Hildred&Clifford Geertz reported among the Balinese, 'teknonymy becomes a vital mechanism with important structural impact both on village organization and on the process of corporate kin-group formation' (1964:94). The scenario is similar to that described by Bloch among the Merina of Madagascar, whereby 'burial in a tomb is the ultimate criterion of membership' (1981:45) and 'membership is shown not by where the Merina lives but by where he will be buried' (1981:72).

<sup>36</sup> Yet, if the wife belongs to the same clan of her mother-in-law, which appears to often be the case, then the two women would be 'agnates'. In other words, cross-cousin marriage patterns allow the 'brother' status to prevail over the 'guest' one.



that birth does for clan membership. A woman becomes a full agnate to her husband's clan (and to her children) only after (and if) she is buried in her husband's graveyard and all due rituals are performed. A similar scenario is recorded among the Nayars of Kerala, whereby 'a virilocal wife seems to gain full membership in her husband's kudumbar (house, lineage) only after the time of her cremation or burial at the kudumbam.' (Uchiyamada 1995) Likewise, among the Soras of Orissa (a Munda group), the transfer of membership from a woman's natal clan to her husband's is not certain until after her death and the rituals that accompany it (Parkin reports this information as a personal communication: 1992:46-47. See also Singh and Danda 1986:33).

### ***Marriage and Death: the case of ambiguous women***

The cases of unmarried or divorced women and widows, particularly, offer useful insights into the understanding of how marriage and death provide or, conversely, deny clan membership.

#### ***Divorced women***

The clan affiliation of divorced women depends upon their degree of contribution to the social reproduction of the clan as well as on the time spent in the household. Divorced women without male children generally relinquish their husband's clan to readopt their father's. As such, they will be buried in the graveyard of their father's clan. If, however, they had male children, their remains would still be buried in their father's village, yet outside graveyard's boundaries. For example, this is the case with a Ram Singh Pareya's aunt. She married in another village, she divorced, and then died, still at a quite young age, in her brother's house. Although she died 'in the house' i.e., she was entitled to the graveyard (see below), her body was buried under a mango tree in the garden. As her nephew, Ram Singh Pareya, explained, she was excluded from the clan graveyard 'because she belonged to a different clan' (*eta-kili mente*). Had she spent more time in her parents' house

after divorce, she would have again acquired the status of agnate.

Similarly, I saw old divorced women who had come back to their natal villages anointing gravestones of deceased members of their native clan - a sign of clan affiliation. During funerary rituals, only agnate women normally sing mourning songs and anoint gravestones. Even the deceased's married daughters are forbidden to do so. Old divorced women are however allowed, and indeed, they were taking the lead during the ceremonies I witnessed.

### *Unmarried women*

Not all women get married. It is an accepted fact, though by no means the rule, that women have romantic encounters without leaving their father's house. They will subsequently move into their partner's village and go through a formal marriage ceremony only after they expect a child. In other cases, and especially in the case of wealthy families, women simply decide not to get married in order to share their father's inheritance with their brothers. By remaining in their natal villages, they entertain a higher status vis-à-vis both their 'real' sisters-in-law (brother's wives) and their 'village' sisters-in-law (same generations' villagers' wives). And indeed, they generally show an unusually self-confident behaviour. By remaining in their natal villages, by working in their parents' fields, by cooking rice in the kitchen of their parents' house and by perpetuating kinship relations with other villagers, unmarried women consolidate their 'agnate' status with time.

Lembo Soy, the eighty-year old unmarried sister of the late Abhiram, who used to be a prominent and wealthy man, is one such instance. Lembo is living with the widow of her late brother, yet her higher status is evident: she owns much more land than her sister-in-law does, she lives in the best part of the house, she even joins some village meetings, where her opinion is heard and respected. In fact, she behaves almost like a 'brother' and a man.

Unmarried women do not give birth, do not worship other clans' ancestors, do not work in other clans' fields and do not nurture members of other clans. It is their lack of contribution to the social reproduction of other clans that validates their 'brother' status. At the same time, however, they are also the most endogamous and their behaviour can easily be interpreted as a threat to the survival of the lineage. By affirming their brother status day after day, they make their 'house' more and more similar to a graveyard, i.e., the site of death and absolute endogamy. For this reason, unmarried women are the most 'out-of-place'. Affinal relations are essential for clan survival and marital alliances are eagerly sought for. For women, being refused constitutes the most abhorred scenario. As unmarried women do not contribute to the social reproduction nor to the maintenance of affinal relations, they are feared and often even accused of witchcraft.

### *Widows*

Old widows who have spent most of their lives in their husband's house and contributed to the social reproduction of the husband's clan normally remain in their husband's house to be eventually buried in his clan graveyard. The case of young widows is however different. If they have no children or very young ones, they generally go back to their natal village, as they are still 'guests' to their in-laws. If their marriages were 'official', however, their children might one day be claimed back by their in-laws. This was for example the case with Badnath Soy's wife, (Dangil clan), who had become a widow some years earlier and had decided to go back to her natal village, Poradih, with her two sons. As people related the story to me, Badnath's father, Sukram, went to Poradih to convince her to come back, but was stoned! The woman preferred to live as an 'agnate' in her father's house and have her children incorporated into her father's clan rather than live as a widow in her late husband's house, where she would have enjoyed a lower status than her husband's elder brother's wife,

Burkundà. Yet, as Badnath's father repeatedly told me, her children belonged to the Soy clan, and he even tried to employ them as workers in his house, but in vain. As Sukram's only two nephews are still very young, hence still likely to fall victims to illness, he is evidently considering Badnath's children as possible heirs, in order not to have their house and lands inherited by collateral branches of their clan.

The widespread custom of levirate, by which young widows are remarried to their dead husband's (younger) brothers clearly shows their affinal status to their in-laws. Were they considered 'brothers' by marriage only, levirate would not be acceptable. Yet, I have seen no case of levirate with old widows: because they have spent most of their life with their husbands' folk in their territory, they are almost 'brothers' to their husband's kin<sup>37</sup>.

### **The making of ancestors**

Besides kitchens, graveyards (*sasan*) also produce clan-hood. They are the place where affines are eventually made into agnates, as they are accessible only to those women who have become full agnates. In this sense, graveyards become the most incestuous place, i.e., the place where the symbolic transformation of wives into agnates is attained. By being buried in the right place, wives come to belong to their husband's village as if they had been born there. In this sense, then, they are the sites of a permanent incomplete exogamy as well as a permanent endogamy. They are the sites of absolute death, of total immobility.

Graveyards usually lie within village boundaries under some old trees and nearby ancestral houses. They are characterised by some flat stone slabs (*sasan-diri*) lying horizontally on the earth or on a heap of small rocks in correspondence with buried corpses. The oldest graves show a peculiar architecture with the flat stone being held above the ground by four rocks

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<sup>37</sup> It must however be said that remarriage among old widows is quite rare in any case.

standing on the four corners of the grave. Sometimes megalithic memorial stones stand vertically, either in correspondence with the stone slab at the edge of the burial ground or along the main footpath leading to the village.

It is not unusual to see people sitting on burial stones while chatting or relaxing. Indeed, graveyards often constitute the main meeting-place (*akara*) of a settlement. It is on clan graveyards that dancing and singing activities are generally held.

The burial landscape also gives some glimpses into the economics and power relations of the villages. The size of the burial stone symbolises the 'social success' of the deceased or his/her household. The bigger the stone, the greater the number of guests carrying the stone to the grave. Clans with a modest graveyard (low number of graves and tiny gravestones) are then considered as not wealthy and with a low social status, and vice-versa. In other words, the more numerous the ancestors, the higher the social status.

Besides producing clan-hood, graveyards also ensure the social reproduction of clans. Even when genealogical links have actually been forgotten, they represent clan corporate groups and agnatic descent. Each graveyard gives ancestral legitimacy to people's presence in a particular territory. The older a graveyard, the more the presence of a clan in the territory is legitimised.

Plate 4: Graveyards and single graves



Graveyards make the relation between territory and people explicit and symbolise Mundas' 'ideology of immobility', as we shall see in the following paragraphs. In the past, clans that left their ancestral villages to disperse territorially would nonetheless have their remains brought back to their graveyards in those villages. This is confirmed by some old ethnographic accounts. Dalton, in 1872, talked about a village named Chokahatu ('the place of mourning') in Ranchi District, on the border with northern Singhbhum. He described it as a very large burial ground covering about seven acres of land and containing more than 7000 tombs. According to the inhabitants of neighbouring villages, it was an ancestral village, where descendants of the village's original settlers used to bury their dead during the secondary burial (*Jantopa*) ceremony, notwithstanding their migrations<sup>38</sup>. By 1926, however, people could hardly remember it, according to another ethnographic account<sup>39</sup>.

As some old people explained to me, remains used to be transported to the ancestral village during the secondary burial. However, they also laughed at my questions about having their own remains moved into those villages. Their comment was that the ancestors (*haramohoroko*, 'the old men') used to do it, but nowadays it is not their 'practice' anymore.

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<sup>38</sup> '[...] Seven thousand three hundred and sixty tombs, mostly of the dolmen or cromlech form [...] and so close together, that you might traverse the ground in different directions stepping from grave to grave. [...] There is no question as to the object of these raised slabs. Chokahatu is still used by the Mundas of the village so-called, and nine of the surrounding villages, for the interment of their cinerary urns, and I believe one need not be long there to witness the ceremony. Many of the cromlechs appeared to have been freshly set up, many had about them a look of hoary age. I obtained a list of villages which have places allotted to them in the burial ground, and from the census returns, these villages contain nearly two thousand Mundas who by their faith, if they preserve it, must there deposit their cinerary urns' (Dalton 1873:115-9; see also Risley 1981: 125 nl).

<sup>39</sup> '[...] according to Birsing Sardar of Ghumadi [...] some pieces of charred bones from the funeral pyre in an earthen pot [...] are carried to the ancestral ossuary of the gotra [clan]. Each of the gotras is said to have an ossuary in the village originally inhabited by its ancestors. Thus the Nag gotra has it obsuary at Dugdha and the Kharisa gotra at Cokahatu. There the remains are carried and interred. But the observance of this custom has nowadays become rare and many of our informants could hardly remember the names of their villages. The location of such villages was even more difficult; they were spoken of as situated far far away.' (Das 1931)

Today, in the secondary burial charred or pre-buried bones, which have temporarily been placed outside the graveyard, are placed within its boundaries. In other words, clan graveyards are what remains of this longing for a 'reunion of bones'.

### ***A symbolic explanation of the role of the ancestors***

#### ***Bones and seeds: ancestors nourishing the land***

Other Indian ethnographers emphasise the relation between people, land, and ancestors among Indian tribal groups. Among the Sora, for instance: 'Living Sora are nourished by soul [...] Something of the consciousness of their ancestors is infused back into the grain grown by their descendants on the land which those ancestors used to cultivate.' (Vitebsky 1993).

The following paragraphs attempt a symbolic reading of structural analogies between rice plants and ancestors in which the bones of the ancestors are the seeds for future generations. These analogies are never made explicit by the informants, but nonetheless, constitute an interesting subject for future investigation.

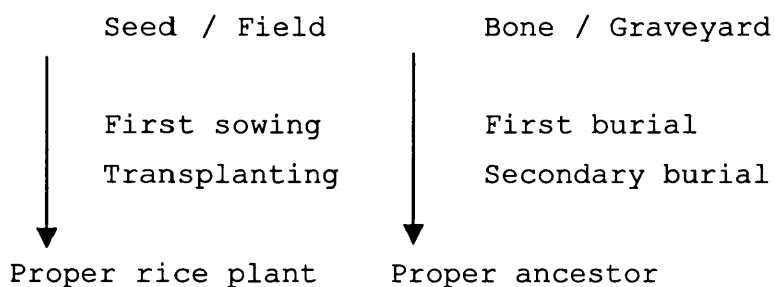
Corpses (*jan-jilu*, or bone-flesh) and rice (*baba-jan*) contribute to social reproduction. The term *jan* translates both 'bones' and 'seeds'<sup>40</sup>. Bones and seeds are temporarily and randomly placed in the ground during 'first burial' and 'first sowing' activities respectively. However, during secondary burial and subsequent transplanting activities, they will be moved and transferred to their 'proper place'. Seedlings will be transplanted into the watery earth of fields and bones will be relocated 'permanently' into graveyards.

Transplanting activities are translated by the term *rowa*. As we saw before, the same term also means 'soul'. The expression *rowa-bolo* (*bolo*: to enter, to introduce) is both used to indicate that seedlings have been transplanted into a field and that a soul has ritually entered the kitchen. A deceased whose



soul is called back in the kitchen is made into a proper ancestor. Similarly, a seedling placed in a field is destined to flourish into a rice plant. In other words, 'transplanting' activities can be seen as domesticating rice plants and ancestors.

One can then note the following structural analogies:



With their bones, ancestors nourish the land and their descendants. The symbolic eating of the remains of the deceased by the descendants has already been interpreted as a form of endo-cannibalism (Bloch and Parry 1982:28). In the present context, the graveyard represents the space where such endo-cannibalism takes place. And we have already seen that the graveyard is also the space where affines are transformed into agnates and exogamy into endogamy.

During transplanting and secondary burial activities, social continuity is most vulnerable. When seedlings are moved into proper fields and corpses into burial places, fertility is in the making. By 'trapping' and domesticating rice plants and ancestors, wilderness is put under control.

### ***The Process of Ancestor Creation***

#### ***Munda Eschatology***

For the Mundas, three elements constitute an individual: an

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<sup>40</sup> Parry reported a similar symbolic equivalence between the bones of a child and the semen from the child's father (Parry 1994:110-1).

inner essential self, the 'soul' or 'personality' (*rowa*); a non-material yet somehow physical concept, the 'breath' or 'vital essence' (*ji*); and a physical 'body' (*homo*). Human beings, animals, and stars are considered animate beings. What makes them alive is the presence of the vital essence. As all animate objects have the same kind of vital essence, this lacks any kind of individuality or characterisation. In contrast, only human beings have a soul, which survives death, is regarded as immortal, and furthermore, is conceived as an individualising attribute, so that every animate being has its own particular soul, distinct from that of others. It is not a person in him/herself who is good-hearted or bad-tempered, but his/her soul.

Souls stand in opposite relation to one's consciousness. While asleep or sick, souls 'disentangle' from bodies and live independently. Dreams are conceptualised as one's soul wanderings during the night, and accounts of people's dreams are listened to very carefully and considered as something that has really happened or will happen. Madness is seen as a kind of permanent dreaming state, and mad people are thought of as totally dominated by their soul. Sickness is often explained as being caused by the soul being in the process of leaving the body, usually another way of saying that death is approaching, and healing practices represent an attempt to 'call the soul back'. I was often told about people's encounters with the souls of dead or extremely sick people. Death is of course the extreme case of the soul living independently from the body. It is conceptualised as a kind of 'permanent sleeping-dreaming time' and ancestors are defined as 'the old and sleeping ones' (*hamhodumhoko*).

When someone expires, his/her personality survives to represent the deceased. I have heard old women addressing their long dead husbands' soul with their own names and characteristics, as if they were still alive, making jokes, and providing them with food and company. Also, I was often told that children need to be buried at a distance from one another as their souls

would otherwise keep on fighting were they buried near-by. In other words, as long as dead people are remembered, they maintain their individuality<sup>41</sup>.

'Good' souls are made into ancestors at burial time. During the 'Calling back' ceremony, they are ritually 'accompanied back' from the graveyard to the house, to join the community of clan ancestors permanently residing in the kitchen.

### *Selection of souls*

Among the Mundas, people die either of a good or bad death. The diagnosis is essential to protect the clan from inauspiciousness, and conversely, to increase the asset of possessing benevolent ancestors who take care of the continuity of the clan. Kitchens and graveyards are the sacred spaces where this is played out.

Souls of people who die of a 'good illness' (*bugin hasu*) are not dangerous for the social reproduction of the clan. 'Good illnesses' are 'natural' and non-contagious illnesses, like fever, cough, or malaria. These souls are ritually invited to permanently reside in the house and to protect the household from there, as the following paragraphs will show. People who die of a 'good illness' are commonly referred to as 'those who died in the house' (*owa:re goejanako*)<sup>42</sup>.

In contrast, people who die of 'big illness' (*marañ hasu*) are usually defined as 'those who did not die in the house' (*owa:re kako goejana*). Deaths by 'big illness' are accidental, violent, or unexpected deaths, or those caused by epidemics and

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<sup>41</sup> This appears to deviate from some kinds of Hindu orthopraxis. See for example Baranasi Brahmans, for whom 'the complete obliteration of the physical remains of the deceased is accompanied by an almost equally radical effacement of his personal characteristics and biography' (Parry 1994:210). However, Parry report Srinivas' account of the Coorgs and their ancestors' oracles and shrines representing 'all the personal idiosyncracies with which he was associated in life' (ibid. 210).

<sup>42</sup> Some non-Indian ethnography shows the use of similar expressions. For instance, among the Lugbara people of Uganda, people who die of good death are said to have 'died in their house.' In contrast, 'a bad death is defined, at least on most occasions, by taking place in the 'outside'.' (Middleton 1982:143-4)

contagious illnesses. In addition, one is said to have died of 'big illness' when he/she belongs to a different caste<sup>43</sup>. These souls are said to be extremely dangerous as they roam around trying to inflict the same kind of death on new victims.

People who die of unnatural deaths are generally considered to be victims of a malevolent spirit or force. If they were transformed into ancestors, those malevolent spirits would be transmitted to the new generations. Hence their exclusion from the community of dead clan members: their souls are not called back into the kitchen, and their bones are not placed in the clan graveyard. They are socially forgotten.

This was for example the case of Chora Gagrai. While coming back quite drunk by night, he fell down and broke his head against a rock. His sons told me he was 'caught' by malevolent spirits who eventually made him stumble. According to them, he had to be excluded from the house and the graveyard in order to prevent those spirits getting into contact with present and future members of the clan.

Mundas' notions of bad deaths are similar to the more general Hindu ones, whereby 'bad death is conventionally glossed as death by violence, [...] indeed anybody whose time has been cut unexpectedly short.' Moreover, 'ghosts remain bound to a world they have only half left, and it is this which makes them so vindictive' (Parry 1994:162).

For Mundas, unlike orthodox Hinduism, however, it is not an individual's behaviour during life that determines a soul's quality (at least 'officially'), but the kind of death he/she

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<sup>43</sup> As we shall see, his-her corpse will be excluded from the clan graveyard. This is confirmed by Majumdar 1950:229). As people explain it, his/her corpse cannot be touched, *pena* the loss of one's caste. This impedes the performance of funerary rituals, hence the exclusion of the corpse from the graveyard.

encounters<sup>44</sup>. This constitutes the primary criterion for determining the suitability of the soul to become an ancestor.

Whenever I asked for the reason why people who died a 'bad death' were not 'called back home', the reply would always refer to the fact that they would harm new generations if 'called back'. In other words, by selecting which souls to call back into the house, then, an illusion of control over social reproduction and continuity of the descent group is performed. By domesticating souls, these are prevented from causing trouble.

People who die of a good death are buried in their clan's graveyard and their souls are made into ancestors. Vice-versa, those who die of a bad death are excluded from it and are socially forgotten<sup>45</sup>.

Burial outside the graveyard of those who die a bad death is conceptualised as a way to avoid misfortunes. As people say, 'the old ones told us not to bury ill people in the graveyard, or the same illness will come back again'. Or more generally, people would comment that 'harm would follow'. By excluding certain corpses from the graveyards, threats to the clan are made explicit. At the same time, however, graveyard's boundaries allow these threats to be counteracted and symbolically overcome.

Another way to avoid misfortunes consists in exhuming bones originally buried in the graveyard. Their presence within its

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the Mundas appear not to entertain the Hindu concept of metempsychosis and ethicization. As Obeyesekere (1968:1980) suggested, in small-scale tribal societies, 'where religious norms are violated, supernatural sanctions tend to be immediate rather than saved up for the after-life.' (in Parry 1986: 467) To further clarify the point made by Obeyesekere, Parry (1986) referred the reader to the comparisons between tribal religions and Indian world religions as drawn by Furer-Haimendorf (1967: 1974) and Bailey (1981).

<sup>45</sup> Besides a 'bad' death, another main cause for the placing of the dead outside the graveyard is the big expenditures funerary rites involve. This is conceptualised as a 'temporary burial.' Death will acquire a social dimension only when the dead is placed in the 'proper place, and when a stone slab is finally put on the grave during the 'Placing of the stone' (*diri em*) ceremony.

boundaries is sometimes used to explain inauspiciousness afflicting clan members. Exhumations do however constitute the exception. My data do not allow an understanding of the methods applied to decide which ancestor is to be disinterred. People's explanations always referred to the 'cursing' nature of the deceased. They said it was a mistake to bury that particular corpse within the graveyards' boundaries, because of some oaths against future generations expressed by the deceased just before expiring or generally during his/her lifetime. All recorded cases, however, show that exhumations were actually performed even years after the original burial. Once bones are moved outside graveyard's boundaries, the souls of the dead cross the threshold of the house and become malevolent spirits.

Those who die a bad death are generally cremated, and all villagers help in gathering wood and in burning the corpse<sup>46</sup>. Cremation destroys bad death corpses and relinquishes any relation between the dead and ancestral land. Cremation is also practised when the cause of a particular death is unclear. In these cases, fire allows one to 'read' from their ashes whether the death was a 'good' or a 'bad' one. The diagnosis is essential for the placing of the dead<sup>47</sup>. In cases of suspected deaths from witchcraft, it is said that poisoned food and the affected organs will not burn. Thus, by burning the corpse, people get rid of the poison<sup>48</sup>. Corpses are generally burnt in the house's courtyard.

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<sup>46</sup> Among Hindus, 'only those in a state of purity are eligible for cremation.' In contrast, Mundas burn only dead bodies who either die of 'big illness', or whose cause of death is obscure. Moreover, cremation does not cause salvation of the deceased's soul nor its transformation into an ancestor. It is not fire nor sacred water, but sacred burial places that allow for 'salvation.' From there alone can one soul be made into an ancestor. Those who die of a *bad death* have their remains burnt and left on the bank of the river to be socially forgotten. In sum, similarity of practices does not necessarily imply similarity of meanings. At the same time, however, and as we shall see later on, cremation is also becoming a 'status symbol' among those people who claim a higher status and see the Hindu practice as legitimising their claims.

<sup>47</sup> As with the Hindus, one of the major concerns of deceased's relatives consists in settling the ghosts of the recently dead who roam around the graveyards and are irritable because of not having reached their final stage. Hence close relatives are anxious to determine the kind of death and to transform them into ancestors as soon as possible, if that is the case.

<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, I could not gather any past instances of suspected death by poisoning that were disconfirmed after cremation. Moreover, during my fieldwork, I had no chance to assist to any 'reading of the ashes'.

Female remains, once cremated, can be disposed of in their courtyards. Not so for male remains. I believe this can be explained by looking at the way kinship relations are conceptualised.

As we saw before, a woman moves into her husband's village and replaces her natural clan membership with that of her husband's. She enters her new house as affine and gradually, in the span of her lifetime, and by growing old in her husband's household, she becomes 'agnate'<sup>49</sup>. The process is completed at death, by joining the group of clan ancestors in the kitchen. By contrast, a man never changes clan membership. Moreover, from the point of view of his own family members, he remains 'brothers' and never transforms into 'affine'<sup>50</sup>. The same is reflected after death: either he remains 'brother' and hence is buried in the graveyard, or he is nothing at all, and his corpse is burnt outside the village.

A woman who dies a bad death has a third possible burial place, which men lack: the garden. One possible interpretation would see the garden as representing the ambiguity of a woman's status in her husband's household. As her status changes from affine to agnate throughout her life, she is insider and outsider at the same time - except at death. When she dies a good death, she becomes agnate. In case of bad death, she can either lose any status and be left outside village boundaries, like a man is, or else lose the agnate status to 'remain' affine. In the latter case, she re-enters her husband's household and has her ashes buried in the courtyard.

In sum, it appears that the funeral pyre burns descent relations (except when cremation is resorted to 'to read the ashes'). To men, nothing else is left. To women, affinity remains. Men who died of bad death represent a threat to the

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<sup>49</sup> Yet, if the wife belongs to the same clan of her mother-in-law, which appears to often be the case, then the two women would be 'brothers.' In other words, cross-cousin marriage patterns do allow for the 'brother' status to prevail over the 'guest' one.

<sup>50</sup> From the point of view of an out-marrying woman, however, brothers do transform into 'guests,' the more she becomes incorporated into her husband's group, i.e., the more she herself becomes 'guest' to them.

clan 'from within', i.e., from the descent group acting against itself. By contrast, in-marrying women constitute a threat 'from the outside' and as such, it can somehow be controlled. It is not inherent, as descent is.

### **Rituals of Ancestor Creation**

#### *'The 'Calling Back' Ceremony*

The 'Calling back' ceremony aims at transforming the deceased into an ancestor by calling his/her soul back into the kitchen of his/her house. It is performed soon after the remains are buried in the cemetery and properly covered by a stone slab.

Kitchens are conceptualised as the abode of a household's ancestors. By entering the kitchen, souls are domesticated and become 'spirits of the house' (*ora-bongako*) or ancestors. They are (allegedly) fed with some drops of rice-beer and rice grains at every meal. 'Proper' meals are offered to them during special ritual occasions.

The following paragraphs present an ethnographic description of a burial ceremony performed on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1998. On that day, a big, flat stone was put on the deceased's burial place, at 11 AM.

Soon after, an empty earthen pot was put outside the side entrance of the deceased's house on a tripod made of tiril wood<sup>51</sup>. Tiril leaves covered the mouth of the pot. In the meantime, rice and lentils, meant for the dead, were cooking in a corner of the veranda outside the kitchen. Once ready, the eldest woman of the house spread some ashes on the threshold of the side entrance. Rice, lentils, and water were then placed on the ashes and covered by a winnowing basket. The food would appeal to the deceased's soul and be eventually shared by the

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<sup>51</sup> According to my data, some men who died of 'good illness' are indeed buried in their gardens. Yet, theirs is meant as a temporary burial, with no stone covering the remains, waiting for the final placing inside the graveyard.



deceased and the other household's living and dead members, at the end of the ceremony.

While a man guarded the ashes from inside the house and checked that no animals stepped on them, the deceased's son and his wife went to the graveyard with the empty earthen pot, put it next to the grave, and eventually pierced its leaf cover with a stick. As I was later told, that piercing is necessary to 'let the soul exit and get back to the house'.

The couple walked around the grave three times, the woman holding a pot of water, the man holding two ploughshares. Walking around the grave, the man clasped together the two sticks and at every sound, the woman let some drops of water fall down from the pot to the ground, and the man whispered the following words:

*Oate hujume, oatebua sikikowa murmurikowa.*

*Dolabu, kaki, sikiko murmuriko oare menakoa.*

Come home, our house is the house of the mosquitoes, and murmuriko<sup>52</sup>. Let's go, auntie, mosquitoes and murmuriko are in the house.

After the third turn, they walked back home slowly and solemnly, performing the same acts and repeating the same words. Once in front of the side entrance, from where they had left for the grave, and facing the closed door, they asked aloud: *Sukuile ci dukuile* (do we like or dislike it)? The suffix *le* (abbrev. *ale*) is the first person plural exclusive pronoun, and indicates three or more persons, exclusive of the one spoken to. In other words, I believe the couple was talking 'for' the ancestors, who were asking if they accepted the new soul or not. The 'new' soul was evidently been spoken

to, yet it was excluded from the conversation (or the inclusive pronoun *abu* would have been used instead).

The person who in the meantime was checking the ashes from inside the house eventually answered: *Sukuile*, 'we like it'. On the one hand, it was the deceased's relatives who invited the soul back home and addressed her as *kaki*, 'auntie'. On the other hand, it was the ancestors who, from inside the house, accepted her. In other words, the couple was physically connecting the grave with the house. They were calling the soul away from the grave, and accompanying her to the house, for the realm of ancestors starts at the threshold of the house. When the couple asked the ritual question, 'Do we like or dislike it?' it was the ancestors who were talking through them. Here again, it was the ancestors who were accepting and inviting the soul inside.

The door was then opened and people started looking very carefully for footprints (*manda*) left by the soul of the deceased on the ashes. They were looking for signs leading around the food and leading to the kitchen. While looking, they made comments about the fact that they had indeed been very careful in filling the leaf-cup with water and with food. They had put only a very small amount of water inside the leaf-cups, so that 'not even the kick of a cat would not have made the water drop outside'. In other words, they were claiming that whatever signs they had found, those signs would have unmistakably been made by the soul of the deceased and not by a passing animal. They were not looking for simple signs on the ashes, but for footprints leading to somewhere. When no traces were found, they jokingly commented that the couple had not talked properly, that they had come from the grave too quickly and that the dead woman did not manage to follow them, as she

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<sup>52</sup> Another kind of very small mosquito. A possible interpretation would assimilate *souls* with *sikiko* and *murmuriko*, as similar ethnographies would also suggest: 'a little earth from the house and a living being of any kind belonging to the house, usually an insect, are put on the bier and carried to the burial ground where they are interred along with the body' (Das 1931).

was old and sick<sup>53</sup>. Hence, the whole sequence had to be repeated. Whereas the first time the man had talked, the second time his wife did. However, they again failed to succeed. Then the deceased's brother's wife was invited to go, but she refused, as she said she was a widow, hence the soul would not have followed her anyway. Eventually, another couple of relatives went.

At the third attempt, some footprints leading to the food were eventually found: 'this looks like a thread. It went this way here... here... here... it is a single one'<sup>54</sup>. After all had agreed, they commented by saying:

*Pasejana, rowa boloa*

Trapped, the soul has entered.

By entering the kitchen, the soul gets 'domesticated', put under control and prevented from causing trouble as 'wondering' souls do.

At the end of the ritual, the household-head then entered the kitchen to worship the ancestors, while the women cleaned up the threshold and start offering rice-beer. When I asked them what would have happened if again no traces were found, they replied that they would have gone back and forth to the grave several times. Thereafter, they would have worshipped the ancestors in the kitchen and asked their help. Yet, they could not recall any instance of souls who eventually did not enter the house, when ritually 'called back in'.

In Hindu practices and beliefs, a 'ghost' (*pret*) is transformed into an ancestor (*pitr*) and a journey into 'the abode of the ancestors' (*pitr-lok*) is conceptualised. However, by performing post-crematory *shraddh* rituals, ancestors are

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<sup>53</sup> Another example of souls keeping the physical characteristics of the deceased.

ritually helped in their journey away from home, either into new human bodies and/or towards the 'abode of the ancestors', which appears to be everywhere else but in the house<sup>55</sup>. The opposite 'direction' towards which the ancestors are invited is clearly evident in the reverse readings of an otherwise similar ritual practice that consists in searching for footprints in ashes spread out after the completion of all death rituals. On the Hindu side, it is not the presence, but the absence of footprints that is hoped for, as this would suggest salvation: 'The deceased's household smooth over the ashes of their domestic hearth in the hope of finding clues to his posthumous fate when they inspect them the next morning. The idea is that they will be able to discern, say, a footprint of the animal form in which he has taken rebirth. When they find nothing, they are entitled to conclude that he has been liberated from the cycle of rebirths.' (Parry 1994:198)<sup>56</sup> In contrast, Mundas eagerly hope to find footprints on the ashes, as 'evidence' of the soul coming back home to reside there permanently and protect the household from there.

It does appear that some Untouchable castes of Kerala perform rituals very similar to those that I observed among the Mundas. Among the Pulayas, for instance, the soul of the deceased is transferred into a piece of cloth, which is then brought back into the house as a god where it will be incorporated into a body of lineage ancestors and properly propitiated to protect the descendants (Alexander 1968: 86-128). Unlike the souls in the Munda eschatology, however, these souls 'sat' inside sacred

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<sup>54</sup> People started to become a bit uneasy by the fact that traces could not be found. Yet, the reason had more to do with the fact that it was getting late and the local market was about to close, rather than with the fact that the soul was recalcitrant.

<sup>55</sup> Yet, the Hindu eschatological picture is in itself confusing. On the one hand, there are ideas about the dead residing in a separate ancestral realm, 'for some it is an extinction of the individual soul in union with the universal spirit; some [...] foresee a permanent and sybaritic residence in heaven.' On the other hand, however, the symbolism of rebirth with the 'soul' entering a new body is also there (Parry 1980: 89-90). In any case, souls seem never to be 'called back home'.

<sup>56</sup> Pocock reported a similar account among the Patidars of central Gujarat, whereby: 'The night after the cremation the women would spread flour on the floor, cover it with a sieve and leave a lighted lamp on top of the sieve to burn all night. In the morning they said that they could discern in the floor the footprint of the creature into which the departed soul had entered.' (Pocock 1973:37)

groves inside the settlement, yet outside the house. For the Mundas, on the contrary, souls reside inside the hearth of the house. Is it from there that they protect the household and nourish the land of their descendants.

## **Conclusion**

Whereas graveyards represent clan corporate groups and agnatic descent, houses represent single lineages, i.e., remembered lines of descent. Houses are the place where souls are worshipped and socially remembered as individuals, retaining the characteristics and personality they had during life. By contrast, graveyards represent common 'kindness' and 'shared substance', made visible by their boundaries. The chapter shows how graveyards are the site of incorporation, of absolute endogamy, of hyper immobility. In an ideal world, bones are to be brought back to ancestral villages.

Houses thus have an ambiguous nature: being both the site of anti-death, where consanguinity is made into affinity through life-giving activities and the site where affinity is transformed into consanguinity. On the one hand, social reproduction is attained by making newborn children into social persons and newly deceased ones into social dead persons. As such, the house 'socialises' and produces group membership both for the living and the dead. On the other hand, however, the house is the site where affinity is transformed into consanguinity: it is also the site of absolute, total death, of production of 'clan membership,' of brother-ness. In sum, the house is the ambiguous place where exogamy is played out, yet where endogamy is also produced.

It is precisely this ambivalence which allows for the continuity in space and in time between affinity and consanguinity, between life and death, between the kitchen and the graveyard. The 'Calling back' ceremony makes this continuity visible, by periodically revisiting the path that leads from the graveyard to the house, or from death to life.

## Chapter Four: The Munda kinship system

### Introduction

The present chapter deals with Munda kinship terminology and marital practices. It first provides a succinct overview of its main terminological features, while highlighting the Dravidian nature of most of them. In so doing, it attempts to answer to what has been defined as 'the Munda question', i.e., the fact that the Munda kinship system appears to belong to neither of the two large groups into which terminologies of the Indian sub-continent are conventionally divided, the Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, however, the chapter also highlights some distinctive Munda features, though I agree with Parkin in saying that 'we cannot talk of a distinct 'Munda kinship model' (1992:218). In so doing, the *gungu* kintype is particularly focused upon. As it reappears over four alternate generations, it suggests a cyclical notion of generation. Thus, it challenges the main characteristic of Dravidian systems, that of lineal duration as identified by Dumont (1953). Moreover, by overcoming differences based on seniority, sex, and line of descent, it stresses equality and challenges the main structural hierarchies, such as that between father and son and between elder and younger brothers.

Equality appears also to be the driving force of Mundas' marital practices. Indeed, the second part of the chapter shows how bilateral cross-cousin exchanges and their synchronic implication, sibling-exchanges, constitute Mundas' preferential marriage patterns.

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<sup>57</sup> See for instance Trautmann: 'Whether Munda speakers retain a distinctive kinship terminology and a set of kinship norms cannot be decided from the existing literature. What is needed is comparative Munda material on kinship and an analytical method capable of detecting the influence of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian systems, to identify distinctively Munda features from which a system might be reconstructed. [...] The Munda question remains open.' (1981: 136)

Diagram 1: Address and reference Munda kinship terminology

		♂			♀		
		cross	parallel				cross
G <sup>3</sup>		gungu great					
G <sup>2</sup>		tata FF MF			jiya FM MM		
G <sup>1</sup>	e	kuma/mamu MB FZH	gungu FeB MeZH  MeZ FeBW				hatom MBW FZ
	y		kaka FyB MyZH	Apu F	enga M	kaki MyZ FyBW	
G <sup>0</sup>	e	bau-honyar  ♀HeB ♂WeB	bau EB e(FBS) e(MZS) ♀HeZH		aji EZ e(FBD) e(MZD) ♀HeBW		aji-hanar ♀HeZ ♂WeZ ♂WeBW
	y	iril ♀HyB teya ♂WyB	undi  YB y(FBS) y(MZS)  ♀HyZH		EGO  misi  YZ y(FBD) y(MZD)  ♂WyBW(kui) ♀HvBW(misi-kui)		iril ♀HyZ teya ♂WyZ
		mamu-hon MBS hatom-hon FZS					mamu hon -kui hon MBD hatom hon -kui hon FZD
G <sup>-1</sup>	e	ge-kowa ♂ZS ♂WBS ♀HYS	hon- sed S ♂eBCh ♀eZCh		hon-era D ♀HeBCh ♂WeZCh		ge-kui ♂ZD ♂WBD ♀HZD
	y	homon-kowa ♀BS	gungu ♂yBCh ♂WyZCh		♀HyBCh ♀yZCh		homon-kui ♀BD
G <sup>-2</sup>		jai-kowa grand			jai-kui grand		
G <sup>-3</sup>		gungu great					

## Kinship terminology

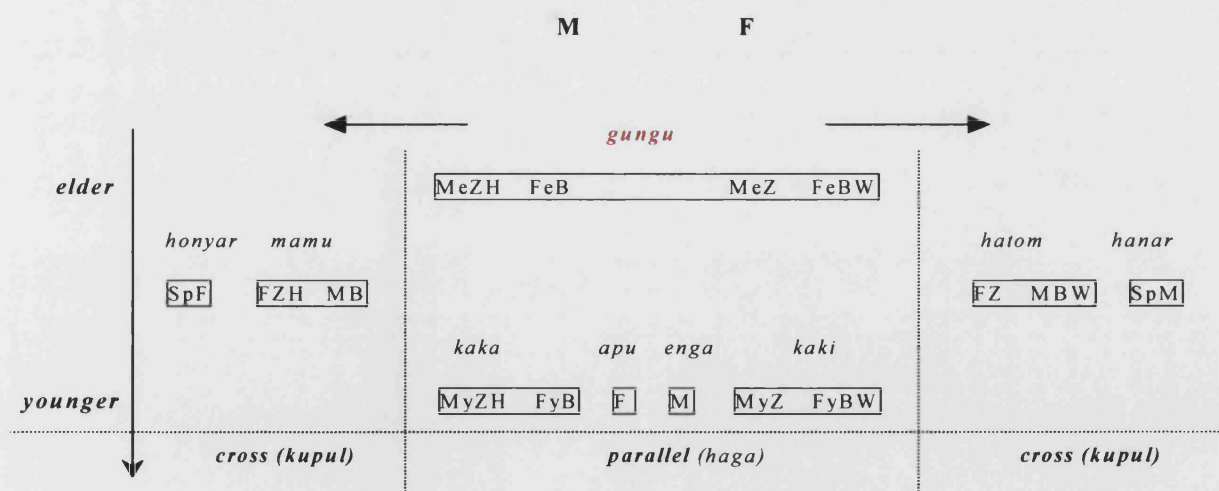
The purpose of this section is to show that the Munda terminology can be considered as Dravidian in most of its features, though it is generally considered to belong neither to the Dravidian or Indo-Aryan systems (Parkin 1992:122).

Nevertheless, the section will also highlight some 'unique' features, such as, the so-called *gungu* kintype, which by overcoming structural hierarchies and assimilating members belonging to different generations, stresses equality and suggests a cyclical concept of generation.

### Dravidian features

The purpose of the following paragraphs is to provide a succinct overview of main features of the Munda terminology and to highlight those, which appear closest to the Dravidian system.

**Diagram 2: Parents' generation (G1)**



In G<sup>1</sup>, parents' siblings are distinguished by sex in relation to the parent. Parents' same-sex siblings are further distinguished into younger than the parent (*kaka*, *kaki*) and elder (*gungu*), with the former being assimilated to the



parent. This is a typical Dravidian feature. Father's younger brothers are often addressed as 'young fathers' (*huriñ apu*) and their offspring is merged under the common category of 'children' (*hon*). Father's elder brothers (and mother's elder sisters) are classified as *gungu* instead. Parents' younger siblings are distinguished by sex and line of descent whereas elder ones are not.

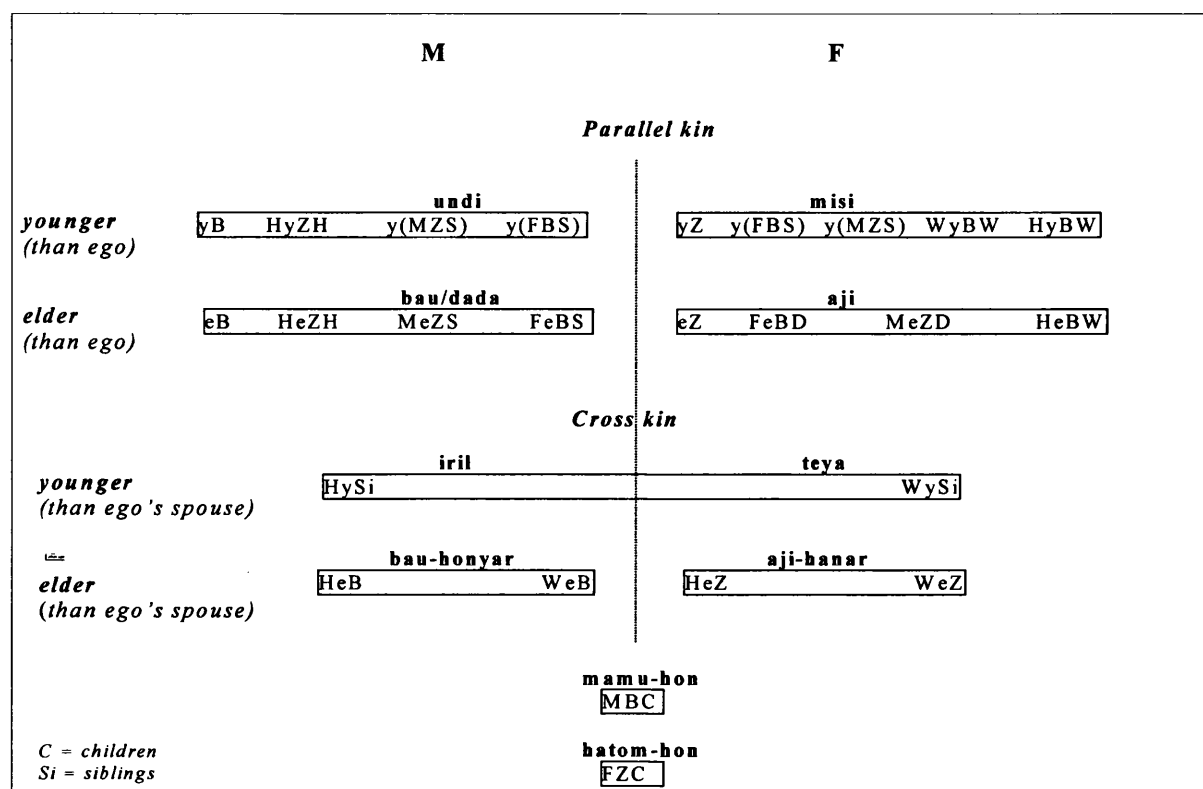
Like same-sex younger siblings, parents' opposite-sex siblings are also distinguished by sex and lines of descent (MB: *mamu*, FZ: *hatom*). They, however, are not distinguished by age in relation to the parent.

Their spouses are reciprocally assimilated (MBW=FZ, FZH=MB), with the possible implication that the two sets of siblings are in marriageable relation to one another (F with M; FB with MZ; FZ with MB).<sup>58</sup> Indeed, we shall see how sister-exchange constitutes one preferential marriage pattern among the Mundas.

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<sup>58</sup> Given that MB=FZH, it is interesting, and perhaps a little surprising, that MBC are distinguished from FZC. The term for the former derives from that of the MB; the term for the latter derives from that of the FZ.

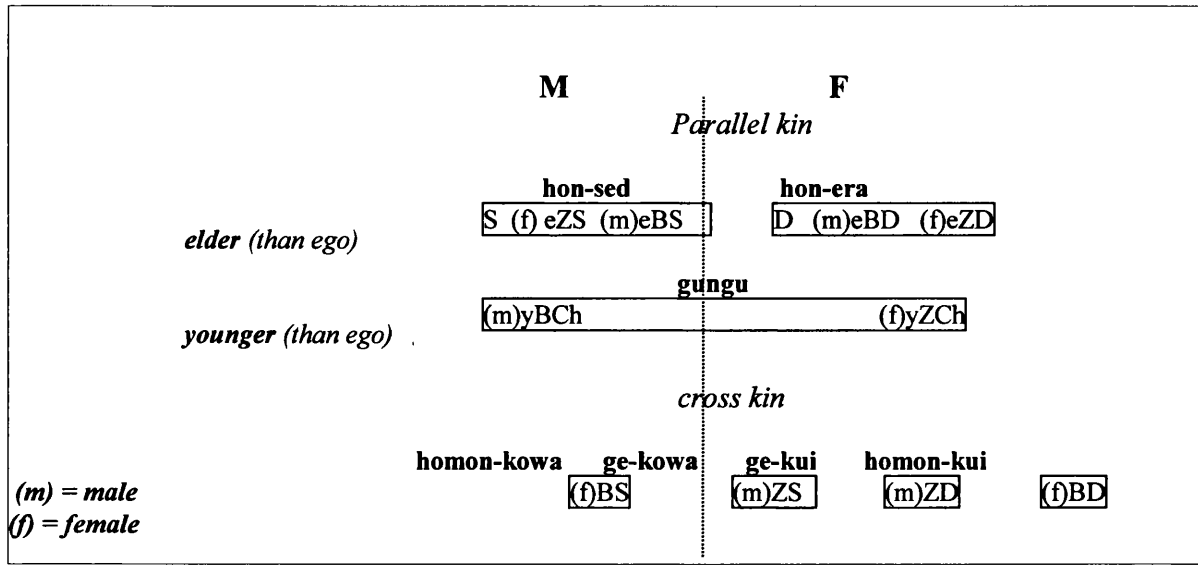
Diagram 3: Ego's generation (G0)



In G<sup>0</sup>, siblings are distinguished by sex and age in relation to ego. Younger male siblings are called *undi*, and elder ones *bau*. Younger female siblings are termed *misi* and elder ones *aji*. Mundas conceptualise parents' same-sex siblings' children as ego's own siblings and marriage with them is conceived as incest.<sup>59</sup> These features are in line with their cross-cousin marital patterns, as we shall see below, and normally belong to Dravidian systems. In contrast, parents' opposite-sex siblings' children (MBCh, *mamu-hon* and FZCh, *hatom-hon*) are distinguished by line of descent but neither by sex nor age. The terminology here differs from Dravidian systems, which generally merge MBCh and FZCh into a common kintype, hence neglecting matrilineal and patrilineal distinctions, and distinguish them by sex and/or age relative to ego.

<sup>59</sup> In contrast, in typical Indo-Aryan systems, no distinction is normally made between siblings and cousins (cross as well as parallel). Accordingly, cousins' children are all addressed as siblings' children. Indeed, among the Mundas too, cross cousins are addressed as brothers or sisters in every day life, though in certain contexts, they are terminologically distinguished (for example in some joking situations).

**Diagram 4: Children's generation ( $G^{-1}$ )**



In  $G^{-1}$ , siblings' children are distinguished according to the sex of the sibling in relation to ego. Children of ego's same-sex siblings are further distinguished into elder than ego (*hon-sed*: male, *hon-era*: female) and younger than ego (*gungu*) siblings. Only children of elder (than ego) siblings are classified as ego's own children. Children of younger siblings are classified as *gungu* instead.

This distinction constitutes a peculiarity of the Munda people. Indo-Aryan kinship systems appear not to conceptualise such differentiation, while only Khurukh and Kondh people show a similar kintype among the Dravidian systems so far recorded (Trautmann 1981). One interpretation suggested in the section about the *gungu* kintype regards relations between FeB and FyBCh as opposed to, and competing with, relations between FyB and his children.

With regard to cross kin, children of ego's opposite-sex siblings lack any senior/junior discrimination. However, they are internally differentiated according to the sex of the linking parent (*homon-kowa*: ♀BS, *ge-kowa*: ♂ZS, *homon-kui*: ♀BD, *ge-kui*: ♂ZD). Again, this differentiation appears not to

belong to neither Indo-Aryan nor Dravidian systems, including Kondh and Kurukh ones.

### The gungu kintype

The term *gungu* is both a reference and an address self-reciprocal term. It appears at alternate generations:  $G^3$ ,  $G^1$ ,  $G^{-1}$  and  $G^{-3}$ , with the following members of the *gungu* kintype:

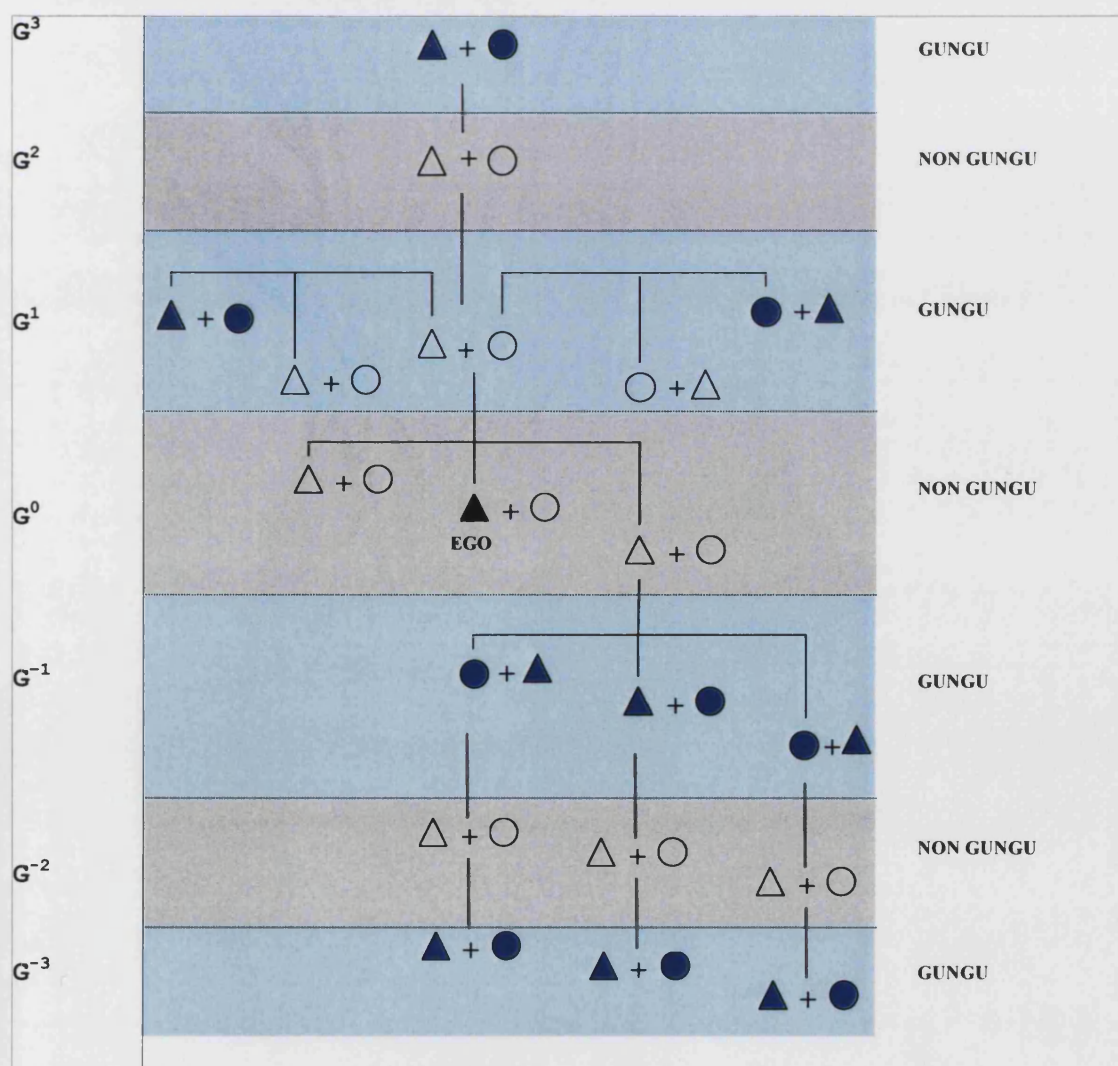
$G^3$  : great-grandparents

$G^1$  : FeB, MeZ and their spouses

$G^{-1}$  :  $\sigma yBC$ ,  $WyZC$ ;  $\wp yZC$ ,  $HyBC$

$G^{-3}$  : great-grandchildren

**Diagram 5: The gungu kintype**



In  $G^1$ , the elder brother of ego's father and the elder sister of ego's mother are his/her *gungu*, ego being *gungu* to them both.<sup>60</sup> Reciprocally, in  $G^{-1}$ , the children of (male) ego's younger brother are *gungu* to him, ego being *gungu* to them (with the same being true for a female ego and her younger sisters' children). Finally, Mundas classify great-grandparents (in  $G^3$ ) and great-grandchildren (in  $G^{-3}$ ) under the common *gungu* category.<sup>61</sup> The same term also means future generations as well as ancestors.

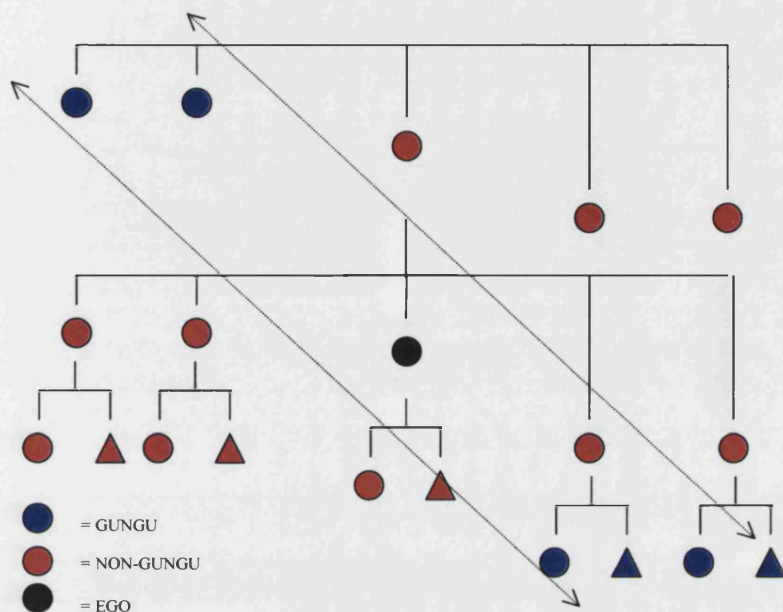
The *gungu* kintype appears to stress equality. It constitutes the most homogeneous and the less internally differentiated among all kin categories as it overcomes distinctions based on sex, age, and line of descent. In so doing, structural hierarchies based on sex, age, and line of descent are also overcome, for example by assimilating MeZ with FeB. Moreover, the kintype merges members belonging to different generations, like 'senior' members of  $G^1$  with 'junior' members of  $G^{-1}$  or great-grandparents with great-grandchildren. By crosscutting generations, the kintype appears to 'break through' conventional hierarchies: that between fathers and sons and between elder and younger brothers.

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<sup>60</sup> An additional assimilation is at work, which does not appear Dravidian in nature: that of MeZ with FeB.

<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Dravidian people distinguish among both great-grandparents and great-grandchildren by the criterion of sex, and Indo-Aryan terminologies by that of maternal and paternal descent.

Diagram 6: Breaking through the hierarchies



Moreover, the equation of the eldest members in G1 with the youngest in G-1 and of 'the very oldest' with 'the very youngest' of a whole lineage in G3 and G-3 suggests a cyclical notion of generational distance. This appears to challenge the main characteristic of Dravidian systems, that on lineal duration as identified by Dumont (1953). As such, it suggests a redefinition of the same concept of generation.

Talking about Dravidian kinship systems, Dumont argued that the generations are normally distinguished, without any assimilation of relatives belonging to different generations (1953). In fact, and similarly to the Munda system, Khond and Kurukh kinship systems, generally considered as Dravidian, merge members belonging to different generations. The Khond system presents an identical kintype in  $G^1$  and  $G^{-1}$ , while the Kurukh system further merges  $G^1$  and  $G^{-1}$  with great-grandparents and great-grandchildren. Unlike the Mundas, however, both Khond and Kurukh systems retain sex differences. Thus, the reappearance of a self-reciprocal category at four alternate generations, which overcomes differences in sex in addition to

differences in age and lines of descent, seems to be a Munda peculiarity.

As Traumann noticed, talking about the merger of  $G^3$  and  $G^{-3}$  in the Kurukh system, 'we cannot be sure these tendencies are [...] properly [...] Dravidian features; whether they represent innovations [...] or borrowing from other source.' He further stated that 'the effect is certainly not Indo-Aryan, and if Dravidian it tends to undermine Dumont's point that in Dravidian terminology there is a linear principle of duration, as opposed to the cyclical concept implied by the mergers of alternate generations in some Australian terminologies.' (1981:143)<sup>62</sup>

The most famous instance of a similar phenomenon of generation 'skewing' or cross-generation equivalence is represented by the Crow system of kinship, whereby relatives who are in different genealogical generations are classed together. As a consequence, a line of matrilineally and patrilineally related men and women belonging to different generations are equated in reckoning kinship. Usual explanations refer to the succession of status, of political or legal rights like rights over property, the right and obligation to marry a widow, the right and obligation to stay in the house to take care of the old parents, and so on.

Radcliffe-Brown read Crow-Omaha skewing rules as expressing the unity of lineages. Seen from the outside, members of a corporate descent group would appear as undifferentiated in status, so that differences in generation and in lines of descent are transcended (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde 1950). In the case under study, however, what is played out is not so much the unity of a descent group, rather, that of certain members with respect to others.

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<sup>62</sup> Note however that a certain notion of cyclicity - vaguely reminiscent of the *gungu* category - is fairly common in the representations of 'orthodox' Hindu populations (see for instance Parry 1994: 209; where he states that the FFF is reborn as his own great-grandson).

Indeed, the *gungu* kintype ultimately focuses on the relation between ego, his/her same-sex younger siblings and their respective children. What really matters is however not just the relation between siblings, but rather that between ego and siblings' children.

In other words, what is at stake is not so much the *gungu* relation *per se*, but rather, its *opposition* to the filial relation. Whereas relations between ego and his elder brothers' offspring mimic the filial one, which is ideally based on respect and etiquette, those between *gungus* are characterised by a degree of familiarity, which is not observable among non-*gungus*. The relation between my second research assistant, Elena (Purty clan) and my host Rasai (Soy clan), provide one instance. As soon as I introduced them, they immediately made an effort to trace their genealogical connections. They ended up calling each other *gungu*, as Elena's FeBW (her *gungu*) is also a member of the Soy clan. Elena had come to the village to replace her cousin Teresa as my research assistant. I immediately noticed that she had a much more relaxed attitude with Rasai than Teresa used to have. Rasai being old and authoritative, Theresa had always shown a lot of respect for him. Anytime he entered my quarters, she would stand up from the chair she was sitting on, to sit on the floor instead. Whenever he called her from the courtyard, she would leave whatever she was doing and follow his instructions. Elena, on the other hand, used to make jokes about him and often disregarded his orders. Curiously enough, I could see no reaction on his part. In contrast, Rasai looked amused and jokingly answered back to her, accepting her rules of the game. One day I talked about it with Elena, and she simply replied that they were *gungus*, no matter how old and authoritative he was.

One could even suggest competing roles between parents and *gungus*. One instance was given by the marriage of Aris, my



teenager neighbour. He used to complain about the fact that he could not marry any girl of his village because of the thick blood relations among all village members of his generational group. One day I saw him coming back from a marriage held in a near-by village, with a smiling face. He had met a very pretty girl there, who apparently reciprocated his interest and even presented him a gift. They met a second time at the market and then a third time. On that third occasion, Aris eventually 'brought' the girl 'home,' i.e., in his *gungu's* house.<sup>63</sup> Early in the morning Aris and the girl quickly entered his *gungu's* house. The girl hid in there till all relatives had been informed. Nobody could enter the *gungu's* house without Aris' consent. In practice, everybody entered the house, one after the other, to have a look at the shy girl who was in the meantime lying on a mattress and keeping her face covered. Only the father never entered. In the evening, all women of the boy's clan met outside the *gungu's* house and called for her to join them. In-married women were however excluded, including Aris' mother. A session of jokes and songs then started. Eventually, the boy joined the party, too, and all women encouraged him to tell what had actually happened while they were coming through the forest at night, and how they managed to reach the *gungu's* house without being noticed. To have survived the forest at night (regardless of the fact that the village distanced only three miles) and to have entered the *gungu's* house unnoticed was seen as a big achievement. In an instance such as this, the *gungu* played a role which somehow competed with the one of the other kin, especially the father, who did not show up during the whole event, and never entered the *gungu's* house to see the girl.

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<sup>63</sup> When marriages are not socially arranged, then they show a similar pattern, in which the boy takes the girl home ideally at night and 'walking through the forest'.

## Marriage patterns

The Munda kinship system is a strong alliance system. Marriage is conceptualised as a transaction between corporate groups. Affinal relations between clans are meant to be pervasive, stable, and enduring through time and the fear of being rejected by one's own affines is indeed tremendous.<sup>64</sup>

The Munda kinship system can be defined as an 'elementary' system: it not only specifies whom one cannot marry, but also whom one can and indeed should marry. One has to marry into an affinal clan, while marriages between members of agnate clans as well as intra-clan marriages are equated and both heavily punished. Marriages between affinal clans follow regular patterns. Ethnographic evidence suggests bilateral cross-cousin exchanges as the preferential marriage patterns with no apparent preference for patrilateral or matrilateral side.<sup>65</sup>

Most clans living in Dirih and Bhanjara have been intermarrying for a long time. The data show, for male ego, a strong preference for one's mother's clan or father's mother's clan. However, the data also show a decrease in the number of marriages with father's sister's clans through time. As the following chapters will show, a section of the Mundas living in Dirih-Bhanjara has been undergoing a process of Sanskritisation and change in their marital practices. Their

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<sup>64</sup> Affines are highly respected. People are obsessed by the fear of being 'left' (bage) by their 'guests', i.e., of being 'abandoned' and 'refused' both in marital and commensal terms. I often had the impression that 'improper' behaviour was avoided not so much because it was perceived as 'wrong' per se, but because of the fear of affines' reactions. Indeed, it is precisely to them that compensation is eventually paid to 'cure' socially disapproved situations, especially marriages. Moreover, affines are essential to the performance of major rites of passage. Children born out of disapproved marriages, and whose parents have been 'left' by their affines, are called 'orphans': their maternal brother will not perform the main rites, theoretically leading to the social death of the child. In contrast, it was never mentioned to me that 'brothers' would punish one another for their negligence: it is always affines whose anger is dramatically feared. As such, they have a tremendous power of social control and their approval is eagerly sought for. The same verb *manatin* (to respect) is used when referring to God and to one's affines.

<sup>65</sup> The rule of bilateral cross-cousin marriage has been taken to represent at least South Dravidian kinship systems, with unilateral variants as derivatives of it (Trautmann 1981:236).

genealogies show a weakening of bilateral exchanges and a tendency towards the matrilateral rule, by which a son marries his MBD but never his FZD. As people put it, one's father's sister is a 'brother', i.e., an agnate, even after her marriage, and so are her children, notwithstanding the fact that they belong to their father's clan and not to their mother's.

Cross cousin marriages only rarely involve 'immediate' cousins, as MBCh or FZCh categories include MMBS's children (or FFZS's children), or any son or daughter on the matrilateral (or patrilateral) side belonging to ego's generational group. Moreover, the data also show a high percentage of marriages between sets of brothers and sisters (extended category), a synchronic implication of the bilateral rule. In this case, too, there is no distinction between patrilateral or matrilateral marriages.

Diachronically, the bilateral rule implies symmetrical exchanges, i.e., daughters of one descent group become brides of another descent group, and vice-versa, in perpetuity. In other words, relations of affinity have duration across generations. As Dumont had noted with reference to the Dravidian kinship: 'cross-cousin marriage is nothing but the perfect formula for perpetuating the alliance relationship from one generation to the next and so making the alliance an enduring institution.' (1953: 38)

In contrast, in Aryan systems, the repetition of marriage alliances through generations is avoided by the rule that prohibits near kin to marry.<sup>66</sup> Although ethnographic evidence shows instances of North Indian groups who 'continually renew their ties with old-established affines' (Parry 1979: 287) marriage within the immediate circle of kin and lineal

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<sup>66</sup> According to the so-called 'four clan (or gotra) rule', which prohibits marriage with members of ego's clan, of ego's mother's clan, of ego's father's mother's clan and ego's mother's mother's clan (Mayer 1960:202-3; Karve 1965:118-23; Parry 1979:224-5).

ascendants is always socially avoided (Trautmann 1981: 25). Indeed, the Brahmanical ideology discountenanced cross-cousin marriages and their two main effects, i.e., the perpetuation of affinity between two groups and sisters-exchanges. Though evidence of such customs has been widely reported among north Indian castes, these customs are indeed 'strongly disapproved of by the more orthodox.' (Parry 1979: 223,287)

### **Siblings-exchanges**

Munda kinship terminology repeatedly suggests sibling-exchange. For instance, ego's father's elder brothers are equated to ego's mother's elder sisters, and the equation implies marriage relations. Moreover, from the point of view of male ego, his/her father's elder brothers are equated to his/her father's younger brothers' wives' eldest sisters. This identifies marriageable categories (FeB with MeZ; FeB with FyBWeZ) which again remind of siblings-exchange. Their marital potentiality was confirmed to me when I was told that marriage with yBWeZ is indeed quite common. Finally, spouses' sibling's spouses are classified as parallel kin (as ego's own siblings). This again would suggest siblings' exchanges. Although it has been shown that marital rules should not be inferred by kinship terminology,<sup>67</sup> the latter is however relevant when it confirms a practice supported by ethnographic evidence.

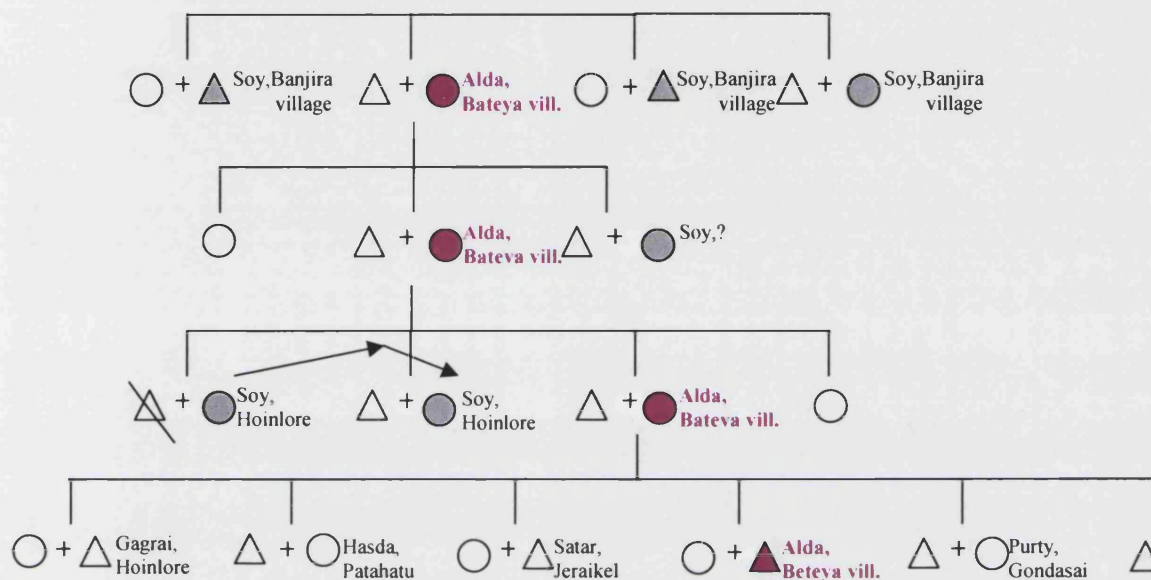
Ethnographic evidence for sibling exchange abounds. The Bandra clan provides one instance. Originally from the southern part of the district, its members were invited to settle in Dirih-Bhanjara to act as specialists of the sacred. As they did not belong locally, they were not part of already-existing affinal networks. They had therefore to start new alliances. These took the shape of sibling-exchanges between

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<sup>67</sup> As Good suggested, 'the terminology sets limits beyond which the rules cannot go. But within these limits, the rules enjoy full autonomy' (1981: 125).

the Bandara and the Soy clan, as the genealogy below shows (first generation).

**Diagram 7: Genealogy of the Bandara clan**



At the same time, genealogical data also show that the Bandara simultaneously maintained their already-existing marriage relations with the Alda clan - from their 'original' village - by the repetition of cross-cousin marriages through the generations.

Finally, the data further show that for alliances to be perpetuated through time, only one cross-cousin marriage per generation is sufficient. To use the same case study of the Bandara clan, marriage relations with the Alda clan are perpetuated through one matrilineal cross-cousin marriage in each of the first three generations and of a patrilineal cross-cousin exchange in the fourth one.

**Diagram 8: Examples of bilateral exchanges between Soy and Dangil clans**

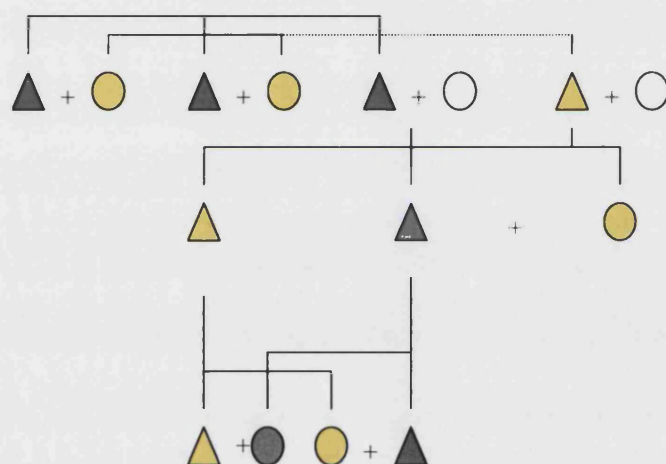
..... putative link between two different lineages, the one of the first generation in Burudih village, and the second one, that of the second and third generation, in Hesadih village.





Soy clan

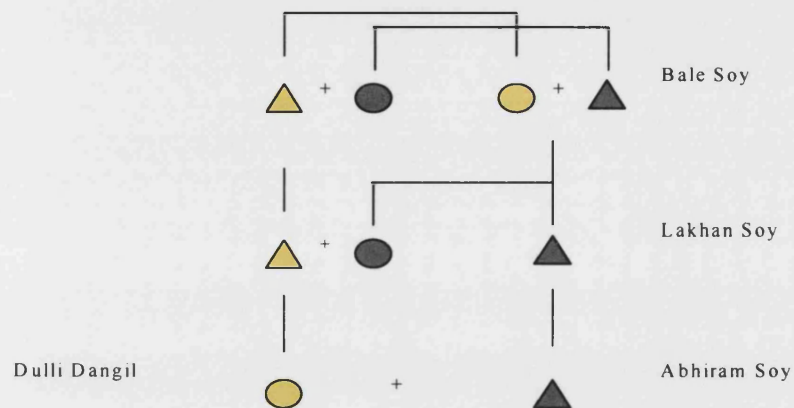


Dangil clan






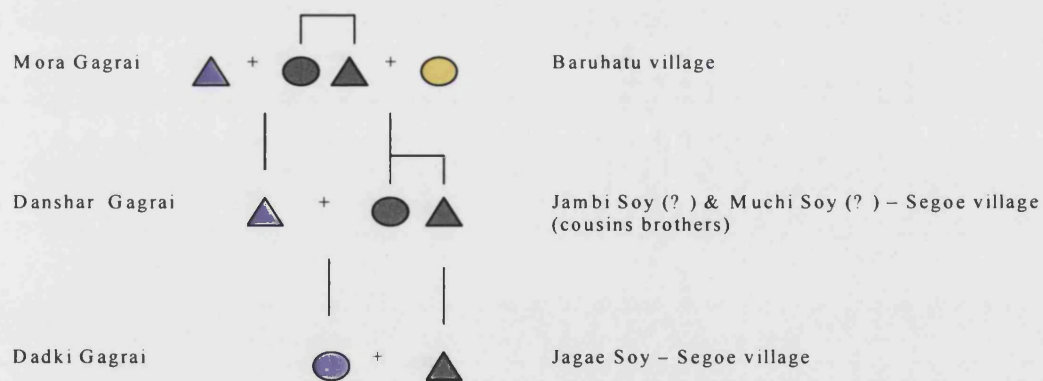
### Actual kins

-  Soy clan from Segoe village, Kutchai block, then moved to Dura-Banjira
-  Dangil clan from Naita village, Kutchai block



### Classificatory kins

-  Soy clan from Segoe village, Kutchai block
-  Dangil clan from Naita village, Kutchai block
-  Gagrai clan from Kimirda village, Kutchai block



## Conclusion

The chapter provided an overview of the Munda kinship system. Although it did not aim at answering to the 'Munda question', it highlighted some features, which appear not to belong to neither of the two large groups into which terminologies of the Indian sub-continent are conventionally divided, the Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan. As these features are shared with some other 'tribal' groups of Northern and Central India, the chapter identifies a possible avenue for future research.

In addition, the chapter also identifies equality as characterising both the Munda kinship system and their preferential marital practices. However, the following chapters will show how those Mundas who converted to a Hindu reformist movement relinquished marriage with father's sister's clans. The skewing of symmetrical marriage rules in the direction of unilaterality is generally interpreted as leading to asymmetrical exchange and the development of wife-giving and wife-taking clans. There appears to be a causal relation between the new drift towards asymmetrical exchanges and the conversion process. Chapter Seven and Eight will indeed show how conversion led to caste discrimination among agnates hence to an emphasis on hierarchical relations between and within clans. The 'new' drift towards asymmetrical exchanges thus appears to be a reflection such emphasis on hierarchical relations, as Chapter Eight will explore in more detail.



## **Chapter Five:**

### **The rebels and the ideology of graveyards**

*'Before the arrival of the British, local adivasis fought against lions and bears to clear this land and make new fields. There was no government at that time. Local adivasi have been living here since the beginning, like mushrooms'.*

Gurucharan Hasda

## **Introduction**

So far the analysis has focused on tribal structures, organisation, and processes. Here, the emphasis is on historical change and political conflict. The chapter deals with the conflicts that have arisen around land and forest rights. It first analyses both the connection between land, people, and spirits and the iconic status of graveyards in indigenous notions of spiritual and territorial belonging. Next, it traces conflicting notions of land and forest rights in the process of land dispossession undergone by the Mundas from the British time to the present day.

Before the arrival of the British, the Singh rajas of Porahat ruled Singhbhum district but their sovereignty over the Mundas appears to have been minimal, as they seem not to have interfered with Mundas' land rights. It was only with the arrival of the British and the introduction of rent payments that the rajas started dispossessing tribals of their ancestral land. Although historical evidence shows that the British understood indigenous notions of land rights, they eventually gave priority to forest conservation and commercialisation. Forest reserves were demarcated and villages lying within their boundaries forcefully evacuated. Post-independence policies followed the same lines, and today forest-dependant people are still prevented from settling in Reserved Forests and accessing forest products.

Thirdly, the chapter focuses on people's resistance to such attempts at land dispossession and forest evacuation. In Porahat, as elsewhere in Chota Nagpur, people initially migrated from the area. Towards the second half of the nineteenth-century, however, also under the influence of Christian missions, they started claiming their rights in courts and filing petitions to the government. Eventually, their protests acquired violent tones, as in the case of the Sardar and the Birsa Munda movements (1860 and 1895 respectively).

Things have not changed with independence. Forest-based protest movements are still on their way and petitions are still filed in the Supreme Court of Justice. One such protest movement, the so-called 'Jungle Movement' (*Jangal Andolan*) developed in the 1970s in my field-site and soon spread all over Singhbhum district. In the Subaltern Studies tradition, the chapter reports local narratives about the movement and discourses around the conflict between people and the Forest Department.

The chapter concludes with a reference to the entry of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in Dirih-Bhanjara and to the tensions that are arising between Jharkhand and BJP supporters. Ultimately, it is the forest, which is conceptualised differently – for the former, a source of power; for the latter, a space of backwardness. To the latter, the state becomes the new, 'modern' source of legitimacy.

## Indigenous notions of land rights

### The association between clans and land

Mundas spiritually connect to the land they settle. The process starts during forest-clearing activities. Before the first tree is cut, the pioneers approach the so-called 'spirits of the forest' (*buru-bongako*):

*'Before clearing a tract of forest, it is necessary to identify the spirits, which are residing in there. Any kind of spirit could reside there, either benevolent or malevolent. We consult the spirits to know their opinion and the next duty is to worship them accordingly. The person who consulted the spirits will cut the first tree. The rest will be cleared by the others soon after. The main purpose of the worship is to read the future of the new settlement. If spirits are not consulted and proper worship is not done, then misfortunes will happen'.<sup>68</sup> (Gurucharan Hasda, 16.11.99)*

The same expression 'spirits of the forest' also indicates Mundas' spiritual practices. These are also locally defined as 'rules that root' (*red: dharom*). By worshipping forest spirits, people 'root' into the territory.

The same practices are also referred to as 'rules, pact of the past' (*sidereya niyam*). Pioneers stipulate a 'pact' (*niyam*) with forest spirits, by which protection is begged in exchange

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<sup>68</sup>The same informant reported the case of a person who disregarded the teachings of the spirits: 'An accident occurred in Kororea. Worship was properly done, and a place was identified where everybody was prohibited to go. Yet one man picked some 'sin ara' [a kind of tasteless leaf] from that very place. Later on, a falling tree, which he himself was cutting, hit him, and he lost his hand.'

of some sacrifice. Forest spirits need then to be periodically worshipped to maintain their benevolent and protective nature. As long as these spirits are offered sacrifices in the 'proper' (ancestral) way, their colonising activities are legitimised. The relation between settlers and local spirits is one of reciprocal duties and obligations. People repeatedly say that their ancestors managed to settle in the forest and to fight against wild animals only thanks to local spirits. What is sacred is precisely that obligation linking present and past generations with spirits and the land.

Besides the 'spirits of the forest', 'clan spirits' (*marañ bonga*: big spirit) are also associated with forest-clearing and with the territory:

*'While our ancestors were clearing the forest, different clan members found different clan spirits and took them. Later, while clearing and living in the settlements, people were eaten by tigers, hence each clan started worshipping its clan spirits'*

(Gonga Ram Soy, 2.4.99).

Clan spirits are associated with ancestral territories, be it mountains (*buru*), plains (*bera*), or villages colonised by clan forefathers in their migrations. For instance, the Gilwa clan worships Gilwa Pat and has Gilwa village as an ancestral village.

The case of the Gilwa clan clearly shows the close identity between territory, people, and clan spirit. However, things are not always so straightforward. See for example the following extract of conversation with a member of the Samad clan:

'In the past, the spirit living in Chutu Buru mountain, where my ancestors first settled, went to them with the name of that mountain. My ancestors brought the spirit with them, when they moved and eventually reached this place.'  
(Janak Samad, 29.5.99)

Clan spirits generally consist of a 'collection' of at least two or three locality names, where 'the old ones had once settled' (*haram horoko bassatanako*). When people migrate, they 'bring the spirit with them'. By settling in new places, they add new local spirits to their original one. Thus clan spirits reflect clan migration paths, acting in a sense as 'oral' maps. The Gagrai clan's spirit, defined as *Dumbra Buru Kitte Galang Sargyan Jarika Pat* provides one instance. All terms, except *Kitte galang* and *Pat*, are geographical sites.<sup>69</sup>

By worshipping a common clan spirit, members of territorially dispersed clans recognise each other as 'brothers'. In other words, common worship creates brother-ness, as the chapter on Social Organisation also showed. The Bandy and Gundwa clans provide one such instance: they identify each other as 'brother' (*haga*) clans. They assert that they are of the 'same kind' because they share common ancestors, have the same clan spirit, and all originally came from the same Gilwa village. Clan spirits are generally designated as 'Big spirit of the brothers of the territory' (*disum haga maran bonga*) or as 'Big spirit of the settled territory' (*dupub disum maran bonga*). These names emphasise the sacredness of the relation between groups of brothers and their colonised territory.

Clan spirits belong to the political domain of territorial conquest and to groups of male agnates. Indeed, worship belongs to the male sphere only. Women do not join the ritual nor eat the meat of sacrificed animals. This is in line with

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<sup>69</sup> *Pat* identifies a kind of mountain spirit, and *kitte galang* refers to the act of making a mattress (an exclusively female occupation).

clan cults described by other ethnographers. For instance, Mayer affirmed that 'all male agnates [...] are expected to worship their Clan Goddess.' (Mayer 1960:184) However, he also stated that wives worship their conjugal clan's goddess at the first festival after their marriage, and that thereafter 'women may or may not worship the Clan Goddess each year,' and again that 'she will usually be present each year; sometimes the men only will worship, sometimes the women will join.' (Mayer 1960:185) As to women's connection to their fathers' Clan Goddess, Mayer stated that some clans allow women to worship her or at least to witness the rite (Mayer 1960:184). In contrast, among the Mundas, women never join the worship either before or after marriage. Moreover, women rarely recall the name of their father's or husband's clan spirit.

Males only can be pioneers, and males alone ritually connect to the land and its spirits. The worship, in a sense, reunites brothers and agnates, but never sisters, wives, nor mothers. It is a cult, which represents lines of descent, from which sisters are excluded as they are destined to become members of their husband's clan. The spirit is also colloquially referred to as 'elder brothers' spirit - agnates' spirit' (*dada bonga* - *haga bonga*). The term *haga* (agnates) belongs to the male sphere and it generally identifies patrilineal and patrilocal kin.

Accordingly, a clan spirit's place of worship is never within the house.<sup>70</sup> Unlike ancestors' spirits, which are symbolically identified with the house, clan spirits are conceptualised as

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<sup>70</sup> However, when people invoke clan spirits for 'simple' favours only, without committing to animal sacrifices, then the house was mentioned as a possible place for the calling of the spirit: 'My father used to hang a pot of beer under the roof of the house -but not in the kitchen-, for the big spirit to come in the house, just before going to the cock fights' (Lodhai Soy 1.06.1999). And similarly: 'If you call the big spirit into your house, and then you go to buy buffaloes, you will certainly be the one to set the price' (Ramai Gagrai, 10.5.1999). In these and similar accounts, however, it was made clear that the spirit was never to be called inside the kitchen, the real heart of the house and its most 'female side'. Indeed, the above-mentioned examples are also interesting because they identify exclusively male activities, like cock fighting and buffalo fairs.

dwelling outdoors. Worship usually takes place under a tree, either in the forest or more often nearby some fields. This contrasts with those ethnographies, which identify the house (of the senior man of the descent group) as the place where the Clan Cult is performed (Mayer 1960:187).

The identity between land, 'brothers', and spirits is made manifest by the way people explain the existence of clans. As they say, they were identified by the 'divine' during worship activities. As we have seen, by eradicating trees, people enter into contact with local spirits; and by worshipping those spirits, they become spiritually connected to the land. People use this spiritual connection between land and people as criterion for social categorising. As they express it:

*'While our ancestors were cutting down trees for new settlements (disumkerako), they found some spirits and took (nam) them. Later, people started being eaten by tigers and bears; hence they also started worshipping those spirits in the very place where they had found them. While worshipping them for the first time, He came to the spirits' place, and divided the people into different clans according to what they were using for worship. So, for instance, Kerai clan derives from 'karai' [a kind of pot], Dursuli clan derives from 'dur jule' [dur: a kind of bird; jule: fireplace]; Hembrom clan from 'hende merom' [black goat]; Lowada clan from 'lowa' [figus]; Haiburu from 'hai' [fish]; Hansda clan from 'hasa jule' [hasa: earth, soil; jule: fireplace]; Tiu clan from 'tuyu' [fox], Soy clan from 'soiar' [spoiled meat], and so on. This is how He divided us into different clans and distributed (hatin) the different*

*spirits, while the old ones were cutting down trees'.*

(Gonga Ram Soy's wife, 02.04.1999)

In sum, 'brothers' worship a common clan spirit, which is, after all, the spirit of the colonised territory (*disum bonga*) and the spirit of the brothers who colonised it (*haga bonga*).<sup>71</sup>

### **Graveyards as icons of territorial belonging**

People legitimise their presence in the territory by referring to the sacredness of their relationship with it. As we have seen, this sacredness derives from forest-clearing activities.

Such activities and related rituals initiate the transformation of *buru* -forest, the untamed - into *hatu* - village, the tamed. The development of a clan graveyard concludes this transformation. Settlements without graveyards are not considered *hatu* yet and ancestors are not 'called back' to protect the inhabitants. People still 'belong' elsewhere.

Only pioneers develop clan graveyards. And only pioneers spiritually connect to the land. When a new settlement is founded, the eldest among the group of pioneers becomes the specialist of the sacred and the younger to him the head of

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<sup>71</sup> Old and more recent ethnographies recorded the same association between clans and land. Yorke noted among the Hos of South Singhbhum in 1972 that: '*Jilu is the flesh or meat [of the corpse] that is returned to the earth that was cleared by the common ancestor of the lineage, thus stressing the association of blood and land*' (Yorke 1974:102). Similarly, Bandra noted in 1994 how Mundas' '*right to their land [is] as immutable as their relation with their clan*' (Bhadra 1994:256). Finally, to quote Dalton: '*[land] dispossession for generations can no more annul their rights in the land that it can extinguish the ties of blood*' (Dalton 1867:21).



the village.<sup>72</sup> Both priesthood and headmanship are hereditary and remain within the clan.<sup>73</sup> Later comers need their permission to settle locally, and they will not bury their dead locally but back in their ancestral villages - at least for the first generations.<sup>74</sup> This practice appears to have ancient origins in Porahat:

*'Wherever the idea of ownership is absent, the Mundari never regards himself as a khuntkattidar. The don [upland] lands he has made are his korkar and he is entitled to enjoy the uplands rent free; but his bones are never buried in such a village.'*<sup>75</sup>

And again:

*'The burial customs of the Mundaris, whereby they restrict (with certain exceptions) the privilege of sasandiri, that is, the placing of a flat stone in the graveyard of the village to members of the original clan which established the village, is a practically infallible test of (1) whether a Mundari claimant is a member of the original clan which established the village; (2) whether the claimant is a Mundari.'* (MacPherson 1908: 46)

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<sup>72</sup> In Porahat, all consulted documents suggest that the spiritual connection between land and people precedes and legitimises the secular one, or, in Dumont's words, that status prevails over power. This appears to confirm Dumont's view whereby 'the temporal power of the king (or the locally dominant caste) is ideologically subordinated to the spiritual authority of the Brahman' (Dumont 1980: 71). Other Munda ethnographies however document the opposite scenario, whereby the headmanship is conferred to the primogenitor. This constitutes an issue for further investigation.

<sup>73</sup> They can be assigned to other lines of descent, from within the same clan, in case of *mala fide*. The roles will shift to other clans only in the anomalous case of political or religious crises.

<sup>74</sup> The Hos from the south of Singhbuhm would in fact allow later comers to bury their dead locally. This is one of those 'cultural' differences through which it is possible to determine whether a village is a Ho or a Munda village.

<sup>75</sup> Porahat Settlement 1906-7, Settlement officers' notes on *khuntkatti* rights in Porahat Estate, File n.1. E. Lister, Settlement Officer, To: Commissioner of CN, 9.12.05.

Graveyards then stand as icons of the sacred relationship between pioneers and the territory. People explain their territorial belonging by saying that their 'elders are sleeping in those lands' (*hamhoko nentare dumtanako*), hence those lands 'belong' to them. Accordingly, graveyards are used as title deeds. Just like single gravestones represent bodies of dead people - the bigger the stone, the higher the social status of the deceased - so graveyards' physical boundaries represent clan's social boundaries, as the chapter on Social Organisation showed. In sum, graveyards objectify pioneering clans and legitimise their land possession. As the Final Settlement Report also recognised:

*'The Mundaris of the Porahat pargana [...] were owners of the soil by long and peaceful occupation. Their method of settlement was by village communities, usually of one kili or clan, all having equal rights, joint ownership, common worship, and a graveyard, the setting of which represented the claim of the village family to ownership of the soil as against all others, and the right to set up a stone which belonged exclusively to members of the kili as owners of the soil' (MacPherson 1908: 158-9).*

In sum, both the development of clan graveyards and adherence to ancestral spiritual practices legitimise Mundas' territorial claims.

## **From graveyards to land records: the Hindu kingdom and the British empire**

### **The Hindu kingdom**

Singhbhum district used to be ruled by the Singh rajas of Porahat, who claim to descend from a Rathor or Kadambansi

Rajput from Marwar.<sup>76</sup> As chapter One showed, they did not interfere with Mundas' land rights. By patronising a local deity, *Pauri Ma*, they entertained a religious rather than political legitimacy. Payments to the raj were of a religious nature and anyway not conceptualised as rent payments. People used to give 'contributions' (*salami*) for the worship of *Pauri Ma* on a voluntary basis, as the following hand-written comment of a settlement officer reporting about the annual worship of *Pauri* in 1904 shows:

*'About Jantara in Banskatta, Dashara salami: given [...] before the Raja came, of their own free will [emphasis mine]. The Bhunya Diuri (Dehuri) does the sacrifice, he takes the head and gives back the carcass to the villagers. The villagers eat it there. Sometimes two villages which are small give one goat - by subscription- to Pauri Mai (Debi) [...].'*<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, British documents and oral histories show that forced labour for the Raja was rare and that taxes on forest products or harvesting were unknown:

*'Dashara salami: 1 goat as usual, for Jantara [religious festival] at Banskatta annually. Beth begari [forced labour]: rothas, bamboos, etc. to CKP [Chakdradharpur, royal residence] on demand*

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<sup>76</sup> The origin of the royal family is highly contested. Some informants even suggested that the first raja was in fact of Bhuniya origins. They said that a Bhuniya from the Diggi clan had found the Raja, a child at that time, inside the trunk of a Sal tree he was cutting down, and that he eventually adopted him. The suggestion of Bhuniya origins of the royal family of Porahat and the mythological reference to the Sal tree, a Munda icon, would be in line with the south-Bihar pattern of rajas claiming Rajput descent, yet having tribal/local origins (for an account of main 'legends,' see O'Malley 1910:221; for the official account of the royal family, see Singh Deo 1954).

<sup>77</sup> Porahat Settlement 1903-7 files. Village Notes. Fly leaf n.2 - Pir Durka, Porahat thana n.472, 24.5.04. Chaibasa District Record Room.

every two or three years. Those who go get one pice each. No other forms of beth begari.' <sup>78</sup>

Finally, evidence shows that payment to the raj was independent from the number or size of one's fields and was not conceptualised as rent. See for instance the following statement by Rusu Manki of Durka Pir<sup>79</sup>:

*'There was no rent at first in our Mundari Pirs. It was Tickell Saheb who first ordered rent to be paid. Before that in Durka Pir, a Sawasi and a Sardar used to come from the Raja in the Gama [rain] month about September and received six gaudas (handful) per house from Munda and Parja of salt - one each for themselves and four for the Raja i.e., the Munda collected this for the Raja. In Pous or Magh [January] they again tax 6 patis (powas) of salt, and six patis of ... and urid. It was a payment to the Raj, there was no rent. Then the Munda took it by parjas to Porahat. As to goats, there was none given at first nor ... but then Arjun Singh demanded them and if you did not ... goat you have to pay 8 annas for the village. Tickell Saheb first placed a tax of 8 annas on a plough then later one rupee till 1880 when the bandobast was made. Birch Saheb also took rent on the land. I did not know at what rate.'* <sup>80</sup>

With the arrival of the British, however, the *khuntkattidars* were made to pay eight annas to the Raja for the first time.

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<sup>78</sup> Porahat Settlement 1903-7 files. Village Notes. Fly leaf n.2 - Pir Durka, Porahat thana n.472, 24.5.04. Chaibasa District Record Room. Extracts of field notes.

<sup>79</sup> Ancestor of the present Barjo Manki of Jate village, one mile from my field-site. 'Manki' means headman of a Pir, i.e., confederation of 10-20 villages. Originally developed along clan lines, today they represent administrative units, with the Manki acting as representative vis-à-vis the Indian government.

<sup>80</sup> Porahat Settlement Dept. File subject: "Settlement Officers Notes on Khuntkatti rights in Porahat Estate". Fly leaf n.3072. Interview to Rusu Manki of Durka pir, 24/1/1907. District Record Room, Chaibasa.

By so doing, the Raja was made into a landlord, and voluntary contributions were transformed into payments of rent. This conflicted with indigenous notions of land possession and:

*'The money was never paid [...] and from 1830 to 1836 the whole body of aboriginals resisted all attempts to realise rent, and waged war on the claimants [...] because of the attempt of the tenure-holder to destroy khuntkatti rights amongst them, through the imposition of the plough tax and the introduction of diku [non-tribal] headmen.'*  
(Macpherson 1908:108).

That resistance against land dispossession and the presence of diku administrators has continued till today, as the next sections will show.

### **The British empire**

The Porahat Estate was confiscated by the British in 1895 due to the alleged conspiracy of Raja Arjun Singh during the Sepoy Mutiny. Soon after the confiscation, the British attempted to extract rent from the Mundas. However, they faced a similar resistance, as the following document of year 1901 shows:

*'The rayats were refusing to accept the proposed rents, and even to attend the camp [...] the rayats would not listen to any reason [...] Rents were then proposed but it was found that the Kols rayats had run away in the meantime [...] without waiting to hear the rents proposed [...].'*<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Index n.295 - Collect. I Settlement - File 1901-2 - File sheet 23. To C.G.H. Allen, Esq., I.C.S., the Director the Dept. of Land Records and Agriculture, Bengal; 06.12.1901.

And similarly, one week afterwards:

*'[...] A general agitation has been started of a most unreasoning nature [...] higher rates should be assessed on those villages who, without adequate reason, refuse to accept the reasonable rents proposed [...] the assessment of a few villages at punitive rates would bring the remaining of the tenants to reason [...]. I will try again to induce the tenants in Porahat to stop this agitation, but without some weapon of offence such as I have suggested I do not see what I can do'.*

Along the same lines, another field officer noted that:

*'Today was the rent fixed for the rent proposal of Porahat villages [...] they refused to accept them and declined to receive parchas. They claim a reduction in the proposed rent or a reduction in the rate on the ground that they are unable to pay the rent assessed, which they consider excessive. I tried to persuade them to accept the rent, but failed [...] hundreds of tenants [...] came in a crowd and throw on my table bundles of parchas, that they had received at rent proposal [...] they went so far as to run away abruptly without even giving me a hearing [...] it is clear that there has been a systematic organisation of the tenants and thiccadars in all the different Estates under Settlement'.<sup>82</sup>*

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<sup>82</sup> Serial n. 25 - Coll. N. I Settl. File n. 1 of 1901-2 - Index no. 270. From: Mr. J.H.Taylor - Settlement Officer, Porahat, Singhbhum, to the Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum, dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 1901; enclosed: note by Babu J.N. Chakramurty, Rent Settlement Officer, Porahat.

In addition to the payment of rent, other British-introduced policy measures contributed to the neglect of people's rights on land and forest. From the 1840's onwards, the East India Company attempted to exercise a monopoly right of timber extraction from the forests. By 1890, vast areas of forests were declared as reserved forests and put under the direct control of the Imperial Forest Department (see O'Malley 1910 for the extent of forest destruction and revenue obtained). Forest reserves were achieved through forceful evacuation of local people from their ancestral villages.<sup>83</sup>

More than a hundred old *khuntkatti* village sites were 'uprooted' in order to create the reserved and protected forests (Areeparampil 1984). The presence of old graveyards in the forest helped locate these ancient settlements.

At the same time, historical evidence also shows that some field officers understood the indigenous notions of land and forest rights and the spiritual and ritual connection between land and people.<sup>84</sup> As a Settlement Officer recorded in 1908:

*'When the reservation of the jungle came and with it the evictions, the infringement of their ancient customary right was obvious even to them, and was immediately resented. They made light of their pattas from the rent receiver and, to use the words of the Joint Forest Settlement Report, protested that "the memorial stones of their ancestors were their pattas' (Macpherson 1908:160-61).*

And again:

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<sup>83</sup> In addition, shifting cultivation was seen as a destructive practice and forest officials sought to encourage sedentarism - outside of reserved forests.

<sup>84</sup> For what concerns Ranchi district, the Christian missionaries acted as mediators between the tribals and the government in the attempt to make the indigenous concept of land rights known to the judges and other officials.

*'The Joint Forest Settlement Officers' Report of 1887 mentions the objections to reservation of mundas and Mankis who pointed to their burial-stones, the pattas of their race' (Macpherson 1908:139).*

The presence of a clan graveyard within village boundaries became proof of *khuntkatti*-ness, while the *khuntkatti* category was eventually recognised legal and a privileged fiscal status. To be a *khuntkatti* then not only meant to spiritually belong to the land: it also implied everlasting legal rights on all land cleared and prepared by them or their ancestors.

The presence of clan graveyards became sufficient proof of 'prior ownership of the jungle' during the settlement operations of 1903-7 in Durka Pirs:

*'The tendency seems to be to take the existence of a sasandiri, once it has been ascertained to cover the corpse of the ancestor of the man who claims it and has not been shown to have been forcibly or fraudulently set up, as practically conclusive proof [of khuntkatti-ness]'.<sup>85</sup>*

The following extract from a hand-written field report during the 1907 Settlement Report shows the British understanding of the tribals' perspective:

*'There is now very little jungle (comparatively speaking) to be brought under cultivation. What there is has practically been taken for 'protected forests' [...] The one great encroachment in their rights, (and although it by no means affected all of them it created a*



*general feeling of dissatisfaction and of distrust of Government which it will take long to line down) was the constitution of the reserved forests in the course of which the tenants were evicted from a considerable number of villages, thereby of course ... their khuntkatti status, for which the grant of raiyati lands elsewhere can never compensate them. Several have asked me whether they would not be able to go back and it is the fear that they will eventually be excluded from the protected forests as they are from the reserved forest that has been at the bottom of most of the opposition to the demarcation'.*

This hand-written note was then included by the Settlement Officer in his Final Report, where he also admitted that:

*'Government certainly never had any rights in the unreserved jungle and waste land' and that the jungles had been seized through the use of force to create Reserved Forests.'* (Macpherson 1908:146)

After the 1907 settlement, however, *khuntkatti* status was denied even to those who passed the 'graveyard proof' in order to make the new kind of legitimacy effective. An alternative source of legitimacy to the customary one derived from graveyards was introduced. By measuring and recording people's land, the British introduced land records as the only valid proof of land ownership. Although compiled according to the 'graveyard proof,' these records eventually replaced graveyards as the only legal evidence of rights on land.

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<sup>85</sup> Porahat Settlement 1906-7, Settlement officers' notes on *khuntkatti* rights in Porahat Estate, File n.1. E. Lister, Settlement Officer, To: Commissioner of CN, 9.12.05.

Nonetheless, Mundas still regard graveyards as title deeds and as legitimising their territorial claims, as the next section shows.

## **The Rebels and the State**

### **From a millennial movement to a political party**

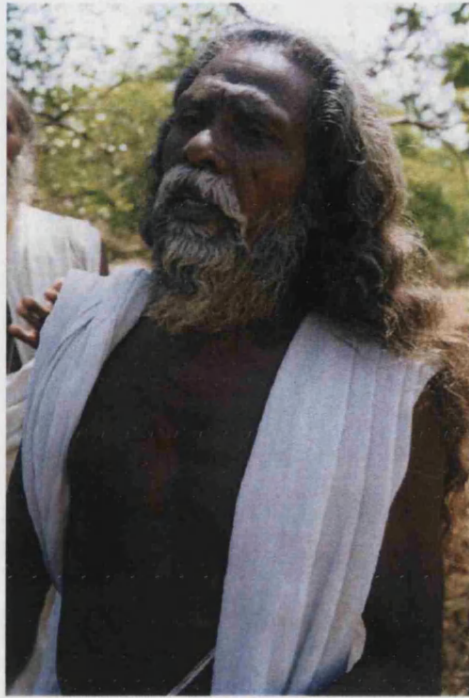
With the demarcation of Reserved Forests, old villages had to be abandoned and people joined other settlements, founded new ones, or fled to Assam. In general, *'there was some trouble on the constitution of the Reserves in 1890, but the tenants were eventually induced to quit their homes. The Mundaris evicted [...] were later on the most active of the Sardars and Birsaites.'* (Macpherson 1908:139-40)

Soon, however, the Porahat area became the centre of one of the major adivasi revolts in Chotanagpur, the Birsa Munda Movement of 1895-1900. Initially a religious reformist movement tainted both with Vaishnava and Christian elements, the movement soon acquired a political dimension. Its leader, Birsa Munda, envisaged an apocalyptic 'resurgence' of what was then conceived as the 'original' Munda kingdom, and the death of all *diku*, be they Christian missionaries, Hindu landlords, or the British. The climax of the conflict was reached on Christmas Eve of year 1900. Birsa preached that British bullets would turn into water and Mundas faced them with bows and arrows. After his death in prison five years later, the movement transformed into a messianic sect, the Birsa Dharom. It still survives today, and is particularly active in the area under study. Its main guru lives in Dewa village, three miles away from my field-site.

Plate 5: Birsaites during the Birsa Munda Anniversary, Dewa village, 1999



Plate 6: Birsa Dharom guru



In 1920, the political component of the Birsa movement gave rise to the so-called 'Adivasi Mahasabha',<sup>86</sup> and after independence it took the shape of the Jharkhand political party. The party aimed at the resurgence of the 'legendary' Munda kingdom by giving state recognition to the so-called 'Jharkhand Autonomous Area'.<sup>87</sup> On November 2000, the Jharkhand state was eventually attained, thanks to a political alliance with the Bharatya Janata Party. The state however only comprised what was once Bihar territory and did not correspond to the Jharkhand Area as originally conceived.

To my informants, the Jharkhand movement represents the modern version of the Birsa Munda movement. They see Birsa Munda as a freedom fighter and both Gandhi and Sibu Soren, Jharkhand's

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<sup>86</sup> The Mahasabha introduced, apparently for the first time, the term *adivasi* to indicate so-called 'tribal' people. Today, the term encompasses all groups enlisted in the Indian constitution as Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>87</sup> The area corresponds geographically to the Chota Nagpur plateau and comprises the neighbouring states of what are today Jharkhand - carved out of Bihar - and Chattisgarh - carved out of Madhya Pradesh -, plus North Orissa and West Bengal.

leader, as his avatars. To them, the fight against the diku continues.

#### **A local rebellion: the Jangal Andolan**

*'Bihar police force was rifle-holder soldiers. They were patrolling everywhere, including forest villages and the places where people were cutting down trees for the department. Their work was to collect daily reports. They did their work through torture and by putting people in prison. The police force was employed by the forest department. They were following the British rules. The British were trying to push us away. And this system is still followed by the forest department.'*

(Gurucharan Hasda, 16.11.99).

After Independence, the Bihar Government resumed the British policy of forest management. Moreover, in the name of environmental conservation, it imposed state monopolies and new restrictions on the use of forest products. In addition, in 1961, a massive program was initiated, by which the existing forests were replaced with fast-growing industrially useful trees.

Big portions of Porahat Reserved and Protected Forests were given on lease to a private 'Corporation'. The 'Corporation' had exclusive rights on the cutting, collection, and selling of wood and other forest products. Vast areas of Sal trees were clear-felled and replaced by monoculture of commercially useful species such as teak, eucalyptus, and tropical pines. Not only did local people have no access to forest resources, but they also received no share from the sale.

The people of Dirih-Bhanjara and surrounding villages eventually rose on revolted during the 1970's. That was the beginning of the Jungle Movement, which soon spread all throughout Singhbhum and is still very active in the area under study.

As my informants recalled, the Corporation soon eradicated all Sal trees as well as other trees and plants essential for the survival of tribals. The Singhbhum forest used to be known as one of the biggest Sal tree (*Shorea Robusta*) forest of the world. Sal trees play an essential role in tribals' life both from a material and a symbolic point of view. They allow undergrowth to grow, thus assuring a rich storage of edible fruits, flowers, berries, leaves, mushrooms, insects and wild animals. Moreover, Sal wood, flowers, and leaves play an essential role in Munda's everyday life, agricultural activities, and religious practices.<sup>88</sup>

Today, the forest has almost completely disappeared. Once Sal trees are eradicated, they rarely re-grow and transplanting is very difficult. That is to say, Sal trees' deforestation is almost irreversible. The corporation replaced them with Teak trees, because of their high commercial price and their fast growth.

The Forest Department employed local men and women to cut, transplant, and collect timber. Half of the labourers' salaries were paid in cash and half in wheat. As forest products were not available and people progressively abandoned paddy fields to work for the corporation, tribals' survival relied almost exclusively on the corporation's wheat.

Sometime in 1978, the wheat that labourers received as monthly payment was found to be spoiled and rotten, hence inedible. Inhabitants of Dirih, Bhanjara, and surrounding villages eventually rose into open revolt against the Corporation and local government officials. That wheat was stored in the

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<sup>88</sup> 'Spirits of the forest' are said to dwell in the roots of Sal trees, and 'spirits of the village' are said to reside in the most ancient of the Sal trees of the Sarna, sacred grove of the village. Its flowers are used in every kind of sacred performance, and their blossoming marks the beginning of the New Year and times all festivals and activities linked with agriculture.



Forest Bungalow of a near-by village.<sup>89</sup> People reacted by demolishing the Forest Bungalow and by attacking forest guards, contractors, and local authorities. They told me they did not go as far as killing them, but simply scared them to death by beating and ridiculing them in public.

In a few days, the whole staff of the Forest Department was driven away. That was the beginning of the Jungle movement, which extended from that village to the neighbouring ones and eventually to all other forested areas of Singhbhum District.

The movement took the form of illegal cutting down of Teak trees. Moreover, people resettled portions of Reserved Forest where graveyards of ancient settlements were found and where Revenue villages had been transformed into so-called Forest villages by the British to ensure labour supply to the Forest Department.<sup>90</sup> By resettling those ancient sites, the rebels asserted the legitimacy of graveyards as evidence of land rights and their ancestral rights on land and forest.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The village of Jate lies two miles away from Dirih and Bhanjara. The bungalow was built by the British, and was used as Guest House by employees of the Forest Department as well as by other state officials.

<sup>90</sup> These villages 'were formed by taking existing tribal villages in the reserves off the revenue roll and converting them into service tenures under the Forest Department' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 161). Their inhabitants were 'allotted land to till for subsistence on condition of being on call as forest labourers' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999:170).

<sup>91</sup>Being outlaw, these re-settlements are denied the status of Revenue Villages, and their villagers lack the status of 'citizens'. Villagers do not have their fields recorded under their names, they are not enlisted in the electoral voters' lists, and they do not receive the so-called 'ration card,' which allows the purchase of basic goods like kerosene, salt, and sugar at a subsidised price to members of Scheduled Tribes and Castes. Moreover, these villages are not included in state development plans and lack any kind of facilities.

**Plate 7: Old graveyards with inscriptions about the legitimacy of resettlement activities**



The government justifies the Forest Reserve with conservation arguments. However, people strongly resent the fact of being accused of deforestation:

*'The Bihar government blames us as the jungle cutters, but we adivasis are the protectors of the jungle since the beginning. Our spirits reside in the roots of Sal trees. We respect trees. Then the British made us look after the jungle. We maintained the boundary line and fire line. We helped in controlling the jungle fire. This is why the jungle is still there. But the government does not approve us. So we have left the government too.'*

Guru Charan 13.11.99

As they would angrily affirm, the government is the real responsible for the fact that the 'forest is finishing' (*buru chabakanae*), a fact which, among other things, is pushing elephants towards human settlements to look for nourishment,



as they would emphasise. They would underline the fact that, whenever the people eradicated Sal trees, it was on behalf of the Forest Department. They would add they know which trees to cut down and to what extent. They admit to purposely and systematically cut down Teak plantations. As they say, the slogan of their fight is 'to plant Sal trees instead of Sagwan (Teak) and to get back the ancestral land'.

The conflict between rebels and the state reached its peak in the middle of the 1980s. On those years, police forces drove people away from illegal settlements. People of Dirih and Bhanjara, who were occupying those settlements, proudly recall the way they faced the army with bows and arrows in 1983. Since then, according to my informants, staff from the Forest Department never entered the area again<sup>92</sup>.

The two neighbouring forest villages provide one instance<sup>93</sup>. Both lying on the boundary of Dirih-Bhanjara, they were amongst those settlements that had been forcefully evacuated. Old people vividly recall the immense power shown by the British. At that time, the inhabitants fled into Dirih and other villages that remained outside Forest Reserve demarcation. One village is shown by a Bhanjara's map of year 1886 (Settlement files) on its northern boundary. Yet it disappeared from later maps, replaced by Reserved Forest. During the Jangal Andolan, the rebels resettled both villages.

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<sup>92</sup> The violent character of the *andolan* did not spare local people who showed no interest in joining the fight. One of them told me he had been punished with 52 stick beats and applications of 'soso-sunum', irritating oil, on his skin. Weekly meetings were organised by the local branch of the Jharkhand party. Everybody was forced to attend under the threat of having his or her houses burnt, and people still recall the long lines of men and women walking from quite distant villages to show up. The most reluctant were Rautias and Mundas employed by the state (*servicekerako*), either as Forest Guards by the Forest Department or by the Corporation in leading positions, or by the Education Department as teachers.

<sup>93</sup> I am here purposely retaining the names of the villages.

### Jharkhand or Vanachal state?

*'People living in Jharkhand areas either cut trees or do not cut trees. Either they are Jharkhandis, or they are not Jharkhandis.'*  
Nand Lal Champia, Jharkhand meeting, 8<sup>th</sup> Sept.  
1999

My informants talk about their fight by saying that they 'do Jharkhand' (*Jharkhand-tana*). The term 'jharkhand' is also used as a verb, to express the act of clearing virgin forest. People use two different verbs for the same act: when it is done in a colonising context, it is translated by the term *disum* or *jharkhand*; otherwise, people use the term *ma:*.

The local branch of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) is very active. It guides both tree-cutting activities and sites' occupations with an unwritten set of rules. The aim is to make sure that people have a political motivation besides the need for new fields. In order to have fields in Jharkhand areas, one has to occupy the site with a permanent hut. In addition, at least one member of the household, even if a child, must spend his or her nights there and attend the party fortnight meetings. In the case of a family-head temporarily migrating to other places, his house and fields are liable to be taken away from other family members and given to someone else, was his coming back doubtful.

Plate 8: A local rally of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha



In sum, to colonise new lands, people must join the fight. Moreover, though not directly regulated by the party, people must adhere to ancestral practices. As the next chapter shows, a section of Mundas rejected ancestral practices by converting to a Hindu reformist movement. These people are prevented from practising colonising activities. This is for instance the case of the Hembron clan. Though the original settlers of a neighbouring village, its members were expelled due to their conversion. Another instance is provided by Pandit Soy, the headman of one such settlement. Though he is the original founder of the settlement, people are talking about replacing him. As a matter of fact, he converted to the Hindu sect. Pandit has been often indicated to me as a person who *does jharkhand* even if he does not really need it, out of greediness. He was used as an example of people who clear forest without legitimacy. He is not looking for the power deriving from the ancestors (*khunkatti pe:*), people would say, he is responsible for the 'finishing' of the forest, just like

the state is. Besides, he is a BJP and not a Jharkhand supporter. And so are the members of the Hembrom clan.

Indeed, the tension between the rebels and those who reject ancestral practices becomes explicit in their political platform. As a matter of fact, their religious conversion also implies a gradual shift in political preference from the Jharkhand party to the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>94</sup>

Since the last Bihar State elections on September 1999, the BJP has been sweeping its way among Jharkhand supporters.<sup>95</sup> The party is probably the largest movement of religious nationalism in the world. Its extremist fringes call for all Hindus 'to eradicate differences' and to realise 'the greatness of their past' in the 'regeneration of Hindu society'. Their 'Hindutva' ideology is based on the idea that virtually everyone who has ancestral roots in India is a Hindu and that they collectively constitute a nation.

In the area under study, the party is fostering the idea of a separate state, called *Vanachal* (Hindi: 'Land of forest') geographically similar but ideologically opposed to the Jharkhand state, in order to penetrate the tribal vote bank. Whereas the Jharkhand ideology is based upon the dichotomy *adivasi-diku* and constitutes for the Mundas the 'natural' outcome of more than one century of tribal uprisings, the Vananchal ideology talks about *vanvasi*, i.e., 'inhabitants of the forest' rather than *adivasi* or 'first inhabitants'. In so doing, it appeals to tribals and non-tribals alike.

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<sup>94</sup> The link between conversion to the Hindu sect and affiliation to the BJP represents an interesting issue for further research. I could not investigate it further as its relevance became evident to me only towards the end of my field-work, i.e. during the campaign period for the state elections on September 1999. Moreover, some BJP leaders interpreted my presence as connected to Christian missions. This created a suspicious environment, which impeded any serious enquiry on the issue. However, the process of conversion to the Hindu sect was widely investigated, as the next chapters show.

To the rebels, people who *do jharkhand* but support another party are 'out-of-place' betrayers, as the following extracts of speeches at local Jharkhand meetings right before and after September 1999's state election clearly shows:

*'Some people living in Jharkhand villages are going towards BJP and Congress. If a Jharkhandi votes for another party, he will be a traitor of the country (desh trohi). I am ready to give punishment to those who will give support to a different party '*

*'We must be careful of those people who make others divert their votes. Those who vote for other parties should be expelled from Jharkhand areas'.*

*'I will investigate during elections about those [living in Jharkhand areas] who will give vote to different parties'.*

*'Some people are earning their livelihood from Jharkhand, but they supported other parties'.*

*'Some people attend Jharkhand meetings, but they support other parties. These kinds of people will be expelled from Jharkhand villages and a special expedition will be organised to do it'.*

Ultimately, rebels and converts have a different concept of the forest. To the rebels, the notion of national property remains unheard and is experienced as an encroachment on their ancestral rights which preceded any type of state formation. On the other hand, converts say they rejected ancestral practices to become 'civilised', 'modern' (English word). To them, supporting the BJP represents one step towards that goal. Being 'civilised' also implies a refusal of the forest as a *modus vivendi* and the neglect of clan graveyards. Hunting

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<sup>95</sup> Besides the Jharkhand Party, the Congress has also been attracting many tribal sympathies since 1953, when Jaipal Singh, the founder of the

(but not fishing) is forbidden. The forest is conceptualised as a dangerous place, full of malevolent spirits. Forest, trees, or fields are not places of worship anymore. Wilderness becomes a negative attribute.

BJP supporters are the best educated, some of them having lived for years in town hostels. They are, in a sense, the enamoured of life in the cities, and the most ashamed by their being or having once been forest people. Forest people, in their opinion, 'cannot eat, talk, nor dress properly'. They admit that once they were all like that, but have 'changed' and do not feel 'ashamed' anymore. Besides, most of them have alternative sources of income besides agriculture: they have stalls at the local market place (bicycle repairing, selling of medicines, books and stationery) or are employed by the civil service as teachers or forest guards. Thus, the creation of fields for the new generations is not envisaged, and other kinds of investments are privileged instead. To the adherents of the BJP, the forest is an 'Indian national property', and tree cutting activities are not something to be proud of. The state and not the forest becomes the new, 'modern' source of legitimacy.

## Conclusion

The chapter provided ethnographic and historical evidence of conflictual notions of land and forest rights between *adivasis* and the State and outlined *adivasis'* main strategies of resistance - from forest-based movements to a political party. At the base of such conflicts there appears to be a different notion of forest: a source of power and territorial legitimacy for the *adivasis* and a source of revenue for the State.

The political scenario reflects such different notions of the forest. While the Jharkhand party allegedly fosters the

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Jharkhand party, allied to it.

'ideology of graveyards', the Bharatya Janata Party sees jungle-cutting as an infringement of the right of the state over the forest by recalcitrant members of the population. Legitimacy derives not from a reciprocal spiritual relationship between people and forest but unidirectionally from a central political authority.

The next chapters will show that a section of Mundas relinquished ancestral beliefs and practices to convert to a Hindu reformist movement. Those Mundas eventually shifted their political loyalties from the Jharkhand to the BJP. By rejecting the 'ideology of graveyards', they look at the forest as a space for backwardness. Both forest spirits and 'forest people' become polluting to their eyes. Hence the process of social discrimination and transformation of 'brothers' into 'strangers' that the next chapters will investigate.

## Chapter Six:

### The *Bodh dharom*, a new religious path

One day in the early thirties, some inhabitants of Dirih-Bhanjara left the village and headed north through the forest. They eventually reached a village called Baredih, where Jabor Munda, a powerful shaman, was known to live. He represented their last hope against a series of misfortunes that was afflicting their village and against which all local shamans had proved powerless. There was a new strange illness, which made people bleed to death through their eyes, mouths, and ears; cattle were also getting ill and dying; and there was a group of witches who used to meet at night and dance clockwise till sunrise.

## Introduction

The previous chapter showed how, in the early twentieth century, the *adivasis* of Singhbhum lost control of their ancestral lands and fell into debt. Especially after the collapse of the armed rebellion of Birsa Munda, alien spirits had proven more powerful than local ones and this added a religious dimension to the political and economical unrest.

As a consequence of the tremendous religious unrest that Mundas and Hos were experiencing, a great number of religious movements developed in the area. Accordingly, a Hindu reformist movement defined as *Bodh dharom* or *Shiuli dharom* entered Dirih-Bhanjara in those years. The term *dharom* (*dharma*: rule, duty) generally designates a cosmo-moral order, while *Bodh* refers to its alleged founder, Gautam Buddha, and *Shiuli* is the name of the village from where the movement is said to have originated. Only one mention of the movement is to be found in the relevant literature (Sachchidananda 1979).

The *dharom* encourages the identification of local spirits with Hindu divinities validated by Sanskrit lore and supported by Brahman priests. This leads to the adoption of a Brahmanical



*Weltanschauung*, norms of behaviour and moral values belonging to the Hindu tradition. By converting to the *dharom*, people sanskritise as they aim at public recognition of their higher social ranking *vis-à-vis* their non-converted kin and their neighbouring Rautias.

In line with the Subaltern Studies' 'tradition', the chapter analyses conversion through the lens of the people under study, by eliciting their own perspectives and explanations about spiritual changes. In so doing, the chapter looks at conversion not as yet another form of domination from 'outside' forces (Hardiman 1987) but as a conscious effort on the part of a 'tribal' group to come to terms with 'the outside world' from a position of equality rather than subjugation - though tribal sanskritising attempts are normally deluded.

The main change brought about by the *dharom* has been the introduction of monotheistic tendencies and the elevation of a single God, Buddha, who is simultaneously also Singbonga, Mahadeo, and Ram. These monotheistic tendencies have, at least at an ideological level, allowed for the coexistence of different and sometimes even contradictory elements belonging to the Sufi, the Buddhist, and the *Bhakti* traditions. In practice, however, the *dharom* has reconstructed the polytheistic pantheon 'by elevating a single God, so that others are either identified with it or simply ignored' (Fuller 1992:175).

In addition, there has been a 'masculinisation' of religion, by which the feminine energy of the divine (*Shakti*) has been replaced by the ascetic, austere, and non-violent God *par excellence* Gautham Buddha, while goddesses are talked about in male terms.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section A links the *dharom* to the phenomenon of witchcraft while section B

attempts an analysis of the eclectic nature of the *dharom*. Section C investigates the kind of spiritual 'changes' brought about by the *dharom* and it explores the continuities with the ancestral system of beliefs and practices.

### **The *dharom* and witchcraft**

Religious communities similar to the *dharom* are generally defined as 'sects' or 'orders'. As the relevant literature suggests, 'in the long term an order or a sect is transformed into a caste, which has a recognised rank in the local hierarchy and reproduces itself only through the birth of children to its members' (Fuller 1992:169). Accordingly, the *dharom* appears to be more similar to a caste than to an order or a sect. Its members often define themselves as belonging to a *samaj* (society). Indeed, the next chapter will show how the *dharom* is associated to the Mundari caste and how its members behave as caste fellows, regardless of their being Hos or Mundaris.

In spiritual contexts, however, people use the term *dharom* rather than *samaj* to define their community. It seems therefore more appropriate to simply consider the *dharom* as a Hindu reformist movement that introduces a set of strict behavioural rules and moral norms. In Dirih and Bhanjara, religious affiliation is not so much a matter of different cosmologies as it is a matter of which rules (*dharom*: moral order, or *nyam*: rule, pact) to follow when dealing with the supernatural. At the social level, observance of those rules plays a dramatic role, with members of the *dharom* obsessively emphasising discipline and the maintenance of the symbolic boundary between what is permitted and what is not.

### **Reasons for the entry of the *dharom* in Dirih-Bhanjara**

At the beginning of the last century, the tribals of Jharkhand were passing through a stage of social, political, and

religious degeneration caused by the influence of dominant and powerful outsiders, as the next sections will explore in detail. In the particular case of Dirih and Bhanjara, Chapter Two has already explored the conflictual relations between the Mundas and their neighbouring Rautias, a caste of warriors patronised by the local raja and employed as tax collectors. In return for their services, the raja granted the Rautias lands 'traditionally' belonging to the Mundas, as well as the headmanship of many villages originally founded by them. This caused tremendous social and political tensions that have survived until the present day. In addition, *adivasis* were discriminated against as Untouchables whereas the Rautias claimed a Kshatriya status. That discrimination is still deeply resented by the *adivasis*.

Competition against the Rautias seems to have played a relevant role in the transformation of religious practices among those Mundas who eventually adopted vegetarian deities and went as far as to reject the local Shakti cult. In so doing, they became ritually more pure than the Rautias who kept offering animal sacrifices to the deities. However, parallel and even more dramatic changes were also taking place.

Sometimes in the 1930's, most of the male members of the lineage (Soy clan) in charge of the spiritual affairs of the village fell victim to tigers.<sup>96</sup> Members of the youngest branch of the Soy clan, usually posted for headmanship, were then exceptionally appointed to priesthood. Yet, they all encountered the same fate. In the meantime, dreadful and

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<sup>96</sup> If these cases constituted normality, then people would not have identified them as one of the causes of the arrival of the *dharom* in the village. In fact, they must have been quite extraordinary. The absence of relevant data on the phenomenon allows for speculations, the most reasonable being that the increase in deforestation activities by the British might have pushed wild animals into the open and left them without game, to look for food in near-by human settlements. This explanation is consistent not only with the opinion of the villagers, who constantly identify deforestation as the main cause for the fact that wild animals, especially elephants, dwell closer and closer to human settlements in search for food. During my fieldwork, two villagers were killed by elephants, and many rice-fields devastated.

unknown human and cattle diseases spread, against which people felt defenceless. People still recall that period with fear and talk about it unwillingly. No reference was made to famine or to starvation. Eventually, the last descendant of the younger branch, Rasai Soy, today's eighty-year old head of the village, was made to act as village priest at the age of 10, yet again without success.

People read those accidents as a sign of witchcraft and the local spirits' dislike of the way village priests were officiating. They then started looking elsewhere for 'proper' shamans, who would be able to appease angry spirits and counteract witchcraft. After the failure of the Soy people, other clans (the Samad and the Pareya) were put in charge of the spiritual affairs of the village, yet again to no avail.

Eventually, a well-known clan of shamans, the Bandras from Rajabassa, near Chaibasa, was invited to settle in Dirih and act as village priests. People told me that the Bandras 'brought their own spirits with them' to counteract the power of the witches against which local spirits had proved harmless. However, misfortunes did not stop and even the 'new' shaman, Udit Bandra, fell victim to that mysterious and dreadful illness which made him 'bleed to death through his mouth, ears, and eyes'. Moreover, cattle were still dying while the 'traditional priest' of the village (as well as the wealthiest and most influential man, Abhiram Soy), was said to be under the spell of witches, as he lacked male heirs in spite of his four wives. In conclusion, everything was attempted, but to no avail.

That is, until news of an extremely powerful witch-finder, named Jabor Munda from Baredih, reached the village. According to people's narratives, Jabor was immediately able to identify a group of naked witches dancing clock-wise at night on the outskirts of the village, a clear sign of his

tremendous power.<sup>97</sup> As an old woman recalled, Jabor made his puja at once and all the witches were driven away. She then concluded by saying: 'before the *dharom*, there was a lot of witchcraft in the village. But now that the *dharom* is here, witches are all scared to death!'<sup>98</sup>

A series of divinations, exorcisms, and purifying rituals followed.<sup>99</sup> People still talk about those sessions with fear and astonishment. The 'traditional priest', in whose house Jabor lived, became his assistant and later the main local pujari of the *dharom*. His religious transformation represented then the first dramatic change from a concept of spiritual legitimacy, which is transmitted by inheritance from father to son and deriving from the mastery of local spirits, to one which is transmitted by apprenticeship and derives from spirits belonging to other lands.

The first *mâth* (temple, monastery) of the *dharom* in the village was built in his courtyard. As people recall, everybody was supposed to 'shake' (*rum*). While in trance, they moved along with a stick to drive evil spirits away (*danda tukib*). Those who did not shake were thought to be possessed by an evil spirit. Thus, they would be heavily beaten with that same stick as the evil spirit was clearly resisting attempts at becoming manifest. The casting out of the spirit was - and still is, among Shiuli devotees - attained through trance, physical violence, the playing of gongs, and loud chanting. That initial spirit-possession session lasted for more than a week.<sup>100</sup> The shaman remained in

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<sup>97</sup> Among the Mundas, clockwise dancing is a clear sign of witchcraft. All traditional dances follow an anti-clockwise movement, as well as the circumambulation (*pradakshina*) of Shiuli devotees around the inner-most shrine of their temple (see below).

<sup>98</sup> Lembo Soy, 29.3.99.

<sup>99</sup> Divination consisted in reading grains of husked rice in a leaf (*chauli jan nel*) or alternatively in rubbing husked paddy grains in a winnowing basket to determine what spirit was inflicting harm (*hata goso*). These methods are still widely used today. I experienced the former one personally, whereas for the latter, I was only allowed to listen to but not to look at the divination.

<sup>100</sup> People's descriptions coincide with the spirit possession sessions I witnessed during *Chait parob*, as I shall describe below.

the village for many months, teaching his disciples the secrets of his art. He then left but paid regular visits until his death.

As in other parts of Singhbhum, the success of shamans in counteracting witchcraft generally leads to 'conversions' (adoption of their spirits) to their respective religious traditions. A shaman's failure to counteract a certain misfortune is initially read as a 'methodological' failure: rules were not applied in the proper way. Commonly, when a shaman fails, people try a different shaman from the same tradition as its 'rules' still have legitimacy. Yet, when all healers belonging to the same tradition fail, it is the set of rules which loses legitimacy and, when in need of spiritual assistance, new religious traditions are resorted to.<sup>101</sup>

This was for instance the case of the so-called Tana Bhagat and Haribaba religious movements, which spread among the tribal population of Ranchi and Singhbhum districts apparently in the same way and at the same time. Narratives about witch-hunting sessions held by Haribaba gurus show striking similarities with Jabor Munda's first encounter with witches

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<sup>101</sup> This however does not imply any form of 'conversion' as such. People generally 'swing' between different traditions and very easily refer to one healer or the other according to the circumstances. Eventually, however, and especially in the case of monotheistic traditions, people are expected to choose and make their religious affiliation public.

in Dirih.<sup>102</sup> As the next sections elaborate, both movements heavily influenced the *dharom*.

### **Spiritual changes - an overview**

With the traditional spiritual authority losing its legitimacy, people experienced a tremendous religious 'crisis' and looked for more powerful forces elsewhere. These had to be not only powerful and efficacious, but genuinely alien, too. Paradoxically, they found refuge in the spirits of those outsiders by which they were socially (and spiritually) threatened and which proved more powerful than the local spirits.

The more radical the break with their ancestral world, the more effective the new spiritual alliance. On the one hand, all local spirits, including those of the ancestors, became *bhuts* indiscriminately and acquired a negative connotation.<sup>103</sup> Their worship was banned, together with all animal sacrifices - and vegetarian surrogates. Similarly, all sacred spaces were symbolically and materially 'cleaned': kitchen, houses, graveyards. On the other hand, that vacuum was filled by a myriad of beliefs and practices deriving from different religious traditions, in a frantic search for new answers. An

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<sup>102</sup> See for instance Arremparampil (1993): 'There was a lot of sickness in a village [...]. It was said that there were many women in that village who knew the art of witchcraft. The villagers called a big meeting to find out ways of removing the sickness from their village. In that meeting they unanimously decided that they would call a *soka* (witch-finder) [from outside the village and belonging to the Haribaba tradition] and make the witches dance. They agreed that even if their own relatives like sister, mother, wife, etc. were identified as witches they would not protest against it. [...] after the contest they took all the alleged witches to a river towards the east of the village. There they mixed human excreta in water and made the alleged witches drink it and told them to stop such practices from that day onwards. After that some of the women regained their consciousness and became normal. Some became crazy and remained like that till death [...].' The village from where this narrative was collected is situated near Bara Bambo railway station, from where most of the Mundaris of Dirih who later converted to the *dharom* originally came from and still have their social networks. It is probable that witch-hunting sessions became more and more frequent in those days, for the reasons suggested in the following paragraphs, and that witch-hunters somehow competed for a 'share' in the religious unrest.

<sup>103</sup> A phenomenon similar to that which Hindu deities undergo with conversion to Christianity.

investigation of the different exogenous influences of the *dharom* is attempted in Section B.

Because of their powerlessness in counteracting sorcery, local spirits ('spirits of the ancestors', 'forest spirits', and 'village spirits') have all been associated with witchcraft. Indeed, for the devotees, ancestral practices and local spiritual knowledge are synonymous with witchcraft. By driving old spirits away, or better, by making them harmless, purifying rituals are aimed at liberating the village from the power of witches.

The spirits of the ancestors are neglected and graveyards are transformed from children's playgrounds into dreadful and scary places. Forest spirits are kept at a distance from the settlement and the festival of *Maghe parob*, during which all forest spirits are ritually called and worshipped inside the sacred forest, has been abandoned by the devotees. Finally, as we shall see, village spirits have undergone a process of 'masculinisation'. The process implies a transformation of the spirits from carnivorous into vegetarian.

The fact that for the devotees, all local spirits have become indiscriminately 'demonic' can be explained by the fact that 'no deity is offered only animal sacrifice, for if it were it would not be a deity at all, but a demonic spirit craving for blood alone' (Fuller 1992:90). In other words, devotees have retained those spirits who could be transformed into vegetarian deities and depicted all the others as *bhuts*.

The term 'spirit' rather than 'deity' appears to better represent these supernatural entities: they lack any anthropomorphic reference (except Singbonga, also defined as 'the old man') and are instead associated with different natural sites: water, hills, up-land, and low-land rice fields, the sun, the moon, the forest, and so on. And they are all carnivorous.



Traditionally, all spirits (except *najom bonga* and *churin bonga*, e.i., those linked to sorcery) have a positive connotation (*bugin bongako*), regardless of their carnivorous nature. Even the blood-thirsty Ma Pauri is generally talked of as the spirit of streams and ponds, who provides villagers with fish. Each 'village spirit' (*Singbonga*, *Nage-era*, and *Deshauli bonga*) is associated with a particular sacrificial animal (a white fowl, a black one, and a red fowl respectively). This derives from the original 'pact' bounding people and spirits. In order to change the kind of offerings to the spirits, a new agreement with the spiritual realm would have to be reached.

In contrast, devotees consider all village spirits indiscriminately as 'bad spirits' (*karab bongako*) and associate them with witchcraft. Moreover, they are conceptualised as belonging to the dimension of the individual: there is no ancestral 'pact' to sanction their sacred relation with the villagers, and indeed some of those spirits are imagined as having a human - feminine - nature. Identified with particular trees, they are ferocious, hot, and bloodthirsty goddesses, whose tantric sacrificial offering must be neglected, in the attempt to 'cool them down'. For that purpose, they are only worshipped as married goddesses and are even imagined as being 'almost like men, wearing British officials' clothes'. In their case, one can properly talk of 'deities', to whom vegetarian food is offered in the attempt to keep them appeased.

The case of Pauri Devi, the goddess of epidemics (*roga*), is particularly illuminating: held responsible for those unknown diseases that afflicted the population in the late twenties/early thirties, and probably also for the high number

of victims of tigers<sup>104</sup>, she was allegedly offered human sacrifices (and more recently buffaloes) in an attempt to appease her.<sup>105</sup>

Devotees would state they have abandoned worship of Pauri Ma and that Gautham Buddha is now keeping her under control. Sukhan Ram Soy, the eldest son of the official pujari of Pauri Ma, used to worship Pauri since his father's death (by a tiger), and until the arrival of the *dharom*. One day he confessed that he was quite sceptical about those initial exorcism rituals held by the *dharom* guru. He did not believe that the stick used for divination could move by itself. However, when the guru passed it to him, he immediately realised that the stick was indeed moving around and he started to shake with it and managed to stop only after a couple of days! He then added that people got so scared that they ran on the top of trees. 'That much', he finally added, 'was the power of Pauri!' Not only was the ritual aimed at manifesting and then defeating the tantric deity, but somehow Sukhan Ram was also expected to 'free' himself from that primordial 'inherited' link with her.

### **Witchcraft**

Ultimately, the destructive power of the female divine is associated with witchcraft. Belief in witchcraft is extremely widespread among Ho-Munda people, who are famous all over Bihar for the cruelty of their witch-hunting expeditions. In fact, the abolition of this custom was one of the main 'civilising' missions of the British officials. The colonial

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<sup>104</sup> A similar association between Earth goddess and tigers was recorded by Elwin among the Konds: 'In one village [where] tigers were killing both men and cattle, the Khonds came and told us that if we would allow them to sacrifice a human child the tiger-nuisance would quickly abate. "The earth cries out for blood," as a Khond told me' (Elwin Papers, Teenmurti Library Archives, Misc.X no.147, Report 5th April 1945; as quoted in Patel 1995:114).

rule developed a policy of protection of the tribes, which soon gained paternalistic tones. A series of reforms were also put into practice, to put an end to tribal customs such as witchcraft, female infanticide and human sacrifice (see for instance Dalton 1872; Patel 1992).

In order to carry out its 'mission', the colonial power worked through local structures of authority, transforming Mankis and Mundas into revenue collectors and police functionaries. The traditional methods of defeating witches (forced eating of faeces, their murders, and the like) lost their legitimacy with the arrival of the British. Mankis and Mundas were entrusted with the task of punishing such newly defined 'crimes'. Yet they were reluctant to report cases of witch-hunting and this became one main point of conflict: to the tribals, it simply constituted no crime at all (Bhadra 1985).

By outlawing witch-hunting, the British did not manage to eradicate the phenomenon of witchcraft, which is indeed extremely prevalent still today.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, the British weakened people's weapons against it. Although I have no relevant data, it seems reasonable to suppose a rise in the number of witches who were left 'unpunished' because of British intervention. The witches' power could not be counteracted spiritually nor socially, at a local level, or at least not by the Mundas or the Mankis, who were traditionally in charge of such duty, precisely because they had been vested by the British with a new mandate. What may have happened is

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<sup>105</sup> I lack evidence to claim that human sacrifices were indeed performed. I speculatively suspect that people who are accidentally eaten by tigers are conceptualised as human sacrifices to the deity, offered in secrecy by the Hindu raja, a threat that today is still very much feared, notwithstanding the 'appeased' state of the deity, and the fact that tigers 'have disappeared from the shrinking forest'.

<sup>106</sup> I was shown a letter sent from the District Commissioner to all the Mundas and Mankis of the area encouraging them to impede the mistreatment of supposed witches and to transmit the names of witch-hunters to him. Identical letters are still periodically sent by the District Commissioner. In the village under study, for instance, there is a twenty-years long dispute between the head of the village and his brother, which started when the latter denounced to the District Commissioner the presence of possible witch-hunters in Dirih village. He also denounced the silence of his brother, the head of the village, on the matter.

the emergence of these one-off witch-hunting sessions during which all villagers were 'tested' by a shaman coming from outside, i.e., by someone who belonged to the 'outside' both spiritually and socially. As such, local people were relieved from any responsibility for witch-hunting practices.

The only weapons against witchcraft were, and still are, socially, ostracism and the payment of heavy fines, and spiritually, the rejection of old beliefs and practices and the adoption of different and more powerful ones, not associated with it. Ethnographic evidence shows that whenever witch-finders were called from 'outside' and these belonged to a different religious tradition, then 'conversion' normally followed.

'Conversion' represents a solution from the power of witchcraft as well as from accusations of it. For those depicted as witches, the only solution still consists in the rejection of ancestral practices. The Shiuli *dharom*, the Birsa *dharom*, and the Mission *dharom*, as they are locally called, are the three local alternatives to ancestral practices.

See for instance the following account, about witchcraft accusations leading to conversion to the Birsa *dharom*:

*'My father brought my stepmother in our house. Some people blamed her, as they said that she knew the art of witchcraft, and referred the case to the Dewa [priest]. So we had a lot of difficulties living in our village. During my father's time, we had to sell our best lands. Why? Because we had to give goats and the like to the villagers as punishment. We had to pay these fines twice, thrice a year. My father never spoke against the majority of the village. [...] We had been punished for six-seven years. When I grew up, I decided to throw forest spirits away. I arranged everything. But the spirits did not go away,*

*not even after all the sacrifices. Six months after the last sacrifice, all the children of my house got ill. Then my father and I decided that it was all a misunderstanding. We both decided to keep away from these [spirits] and to follow another path.'*

(Birsa Munda 18/05/1999)

### **The *dharom*: Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traits**

Shiuli devotees have replaced the 'path of the ancestors' with exogenous elements belonging to the Muslim, *Bhakti*, and Buddhist traditions, each one exercising its influence in different periods of time and through different channels.

The origin of the *dharom* is traced back to Gaya district, central Bihar. The district is the main Buddhist centre of India, with Bodhgaya being the place where Buddha had his first revelation. As already mentioned, the *dharom* is also known as the *Bhod* (Buddha) *dharom*, and people clearly define themselves as Buddhists and as followers of Buddhist Precepts. Indeed, Gautam Buddha is their main Bhagwan (devotee), to whom they make offerings and vows.<sup>107</sup>

The *dharom* originated from Shiuli, a village famous all over Gaya district for its Muslim *dargah* (tomb, court, or shrine) and related exorcising and therapeutic Sufi cults. Indeed, the *dharom*'s main ritual performances show striking similarities with the Sufi cult.

Yet, the *dharom*'s original guru is a Mahadeo (Shiva) devotee. The myth runs as follows: he was a young member of the Gau caste from the village of Shiuli. One day, while herding his cattle, he witnessed a strange phenomenon: a stone sucking the milk from one of his cows. The boy made various attempts at taking the stone away from the cow, yet unsuccessfully. He

stopped herding the cattle, until one night he dreamt that the stone was telling him to worship it in order to avoid sufferings (*hasu-duku*). As people say, 'it was Mahadeo talking through that stone'. In Dirih, they have replicas of that first stone and define it as a 'vehicle' (*gari*) to enter into contact with God - though in this case, the God is not Buddha, but Mahadeo.

Finally, the *dharom* shares many elements with the Vaishnavite devotional and *Bhakti* movements which developed among the Hos and the Mundas of Singhbhum in the same period and in similar historical circumstances, and which are generally interpreted as sanskritising movements.

The interaction between Muslim, *Bhakti*, and Buddhist traditions has produced a fresh synthesis over the years. It is my suggestion that, whatever its origins, the *dharom* has developed a unique local dimension which lacks any 'pure' form. Yet, this is the norm in the Indian context, where popular religious practice continuously reshapes 'pure forms' at the local level (see for example Oberoi: 1994).

Probably enacted by ascetics and healers travelling from village to village, and from village to city, the *dharom* apparently fed upon those newly created cultural networks which worked as channels of communication of various traditions at different levels and periods of time.

What follows is an analysis of the *dharom* in relation to these main traditions which, for analytical purposes only, have been identified with reference to ideal, 'pure' forms: the Muslim, the *Bhakti*, and the Buddhist one.

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<sup>107</sup> The fact that Buddha is not strictly a God never appeared to constitute a problem to them.

### Sufi saints, dargahs, and exorcising rituals

As already mentioned, the Shiuli *dharom* derives its name from the village of Shiuli in the Gaya district. The village is famous all over the district for its Sufi *dargah*. Sufi saint's tombs are centres of pilgrimage with a reputation that generally spreads far beyond the local community. The Shiuli *dargah* honours the remains of the Muslim saint Hazrat Sheikh Sayyid Seyalkoti Kahmatullah Alaih, and is managed by a Sayyid Pir, i.e., by someone who is generally 'credited with inherited charisma originating in the family of the Prophet' (Bose 1998).<sup>108</sup>

Although not all of them are associated with exorcism<sup>109</sup>, *dargahs* are generally famous for the treatment of psychiatric illnesses and exorcisms and are thus one major instance of the concurrence of shrines and healing centres (see for example Pfleiderer: 1984). Similarly, *dargahs* in the Gaya district used to be associated with the casting out of evil spirits and witchcraft: 'The most marked superstitions which at the present day they share with Hindus, arise from the belief on Bhuts or evil spirits [...] it is a favourite plan to expel the evil spirit by taking his victim to a Dargah where he can be under the influence of a saintly peer. Closely connected with the belief in Bhuts or evil spirits is the fear of Jadh or sorcery' (O'Malley 1906: 78)<sup>110</sup>.

According to the same source, the Shiuli *dargah* was one of the most popular for that same reason already at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Another celebrated dargah is at

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<sup>108</sup> The Shiuli dharga is managed by Kurban Shah and Shaban Shah as well as by one Patel. Nearby the *dargah* there is a mosque, managed by Abdullah Hamman.

<sup>109</sup> In fact, 'Only some *dargahs* function as centres for exorcism [while others] refuse to lower themselves to those performing practices which characterise the most rural saints, generally called babas, pertaining to 'popular' religion,' (Assayag 1995:84). Original text: 'Seules donc quelques dargâh sont des centre d'exorcisme. [autres] refusant de s'abaisser aux pratiques thaumaturgiques qui caractérisent les saints plus rustiques, dits généralement bâbâ, qu'affectionne la religion <<populaire>>' ; the translation is mine.

<sup>110</sup> L. S.S. O'Malley, 5/11/01, in Risley Private Papers, IOL, MSS.EUR.E.295, Gaya District, Vol.8; emphasis mine.

Shiuli near Rafiganj; this is the tomb of a Pir, known as Sayid Sial Koti: this is more specially visited on a Thursday and has great fame for its efficacy in casting out evil spirits. Hindus and Mussalmans alike make offering at it, specially in Chait and on the Dasahra.'<sup>111</sup>

Today, the *dargah* is still famous for its exorcising powers and treatment of mental problems.<sup>112</sup> Pilgrims visit it on a weekly or more permanent basis.

Possessed/mad persons are taken to the *dargah* by their relatives and made to camp near the tomb for weeks, months or even years. It is said that the simple proximity to the tomb provokes the spirit to reveal itself.<sup>113</sup> Exorcising rituals are still carried out on Thursdays or during Chait<sup>114</sup> and Dusshara festivals.

One commonality between rituals in the *dargah* and the Shiuli *dharom* is the calendar of festivities. Exorcising rituals at the *dargah* are performed only on Thursdays, or during Chait or Dusshara, and the same is true for the Shiuli *dharom*: the two festivals consist of individual 'confessions' and collective possession drama, and Thursdays are devoted to rest, worship and fasting.

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<sup>111</sup> L. S.S. O'Malley, *ibid.*, emphasis mine. See also O'Malley 1906: 78.

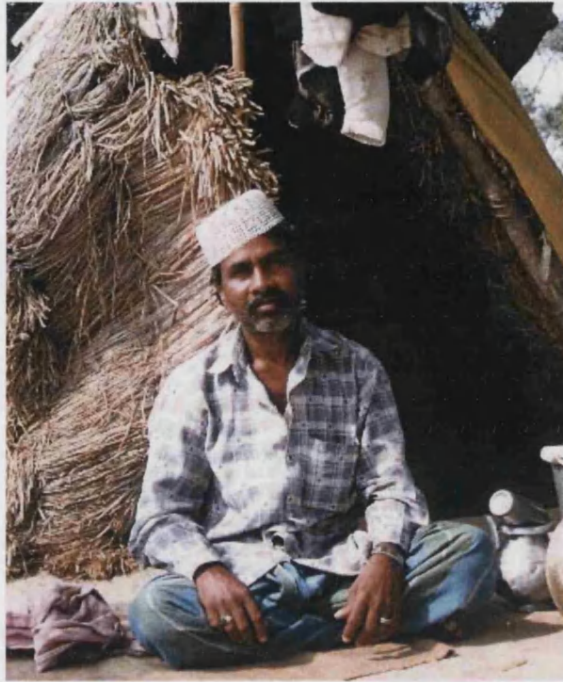
<sup>112</sup> For a discussion about the link between *dargahs*, spirit possession, and mental health see Kakar (1984).

<sup>113</sup> A common characteristic of *dargahs* all over India (see for example Pfleiderer 1981).

<sup>114</sup> According to the following extract, the Chait festival appears to have a Muslim origin and to imply worship of the Sun: '5. [...] Formerly ignorant musalmans of low caste used to celebrate *Chhath* ceremonies in worship of the Sun, but these have been given up to a great extent. It is however known among some low caste Mussalmans who perform sun worship like Hindus in the *Chhath* of Kartiee and Chait. They abstain from salt and milk and offer sweatmeats and employ *ojhas* at this time especially for deliverance from some illness or trouble. Libations to the sun are also offered as by Hindus.' L. S.S. O'Malley, 5/11/01, in Risley Private Papers, MSS.EUR.E.295 Vol.8.



Plate 9: Pilgrims living near the *dargah* in Shiuli village



Likewise, Shiuli māth do not only work as a weekly pilgrimage centres, indeed a unique phenomenon in the area, but also as a healing centres, similarly to *dargahs*, with devotees coming from far-away villages and spending one or more nights in the māth.

Finally, the use of violence and aggressiveness during exorcism at *māths* and at the *dargah* constitutes further evidence of their common origin. Exorcism by the Shiuli *dargah* involves the use of chains. According to my local informants, evil spirits initially resist the power of the saint, but eventually agree to leave the body of the victim. It is at this moment only that the victim himself/herself asks to be chained, while experiencing a trance, and spontaneously approaches the wall where the chains are tied. Immediately after the chains are locked, the victim becomes unconscious. He/she remains in such state until the spirit leaves the body and the chains automatically unlock. In the meantime, the victim is periodically fed by the *pujari*.

This use of chains echoes that of other *dargahs*. At Mira Datar near Ahmedabad, for instance, 'patients who tend to be violent are put into chains [...] tied to the wall.' (Pfleiderer 1981:222). Again, in the Bava Gor *dargah* in south Gujarat, 'the accused must stand at a place outside the shrine where iron rings are put around his or her ankles. If, during the ritual, the iron rings open, innocence is proved.' (Bose 1998:128) Another recorded instance is that of Vishalgad *dargah* near Kolhapur (Maharashtra), where 'they circumambulate around the *dargah* with iron rings around the ankle and metallic chains at the feet.' (Assayag 1995:109)<sup>115</sup> Iron rings, just like chains in the Shiuli *dargah*, are generally seen as signs through which the saint directly communicates the truth to the people.

People in Dirih are aware of the existence of these chains. Yet, the latter have lost their mystical and 'therapeutic' character and are seen instead as penitence and a punishment measure for transgressors of the 'rules of the *dharom*'. In the same way, exorcism is seen more as a 'confession' and

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<sup>115</sup> Original text: 'on circumambule autour de sa *dargah* avec des menottes en bois et des entraves métalliques aux pieds'; translation mine.

expiation of sin. The 'sinners' are 'automatically' chained to the wall, where they remain, senseless, for seven days. After the seventh day, they are redeemed from their sins and given some money by the pujari to go back to their villages. As we shall see later in the chapter, the *dharom* is leading to an 'ethicization of religious life' by which rules and discipline play a key role and transgressors are severely punished.

Exorcism similar to the ones at the *dargah* constitute the essence of the *dharom*, which, as has been described, developed out of an attempt to cast out evil spirits and to counteract witchcraft. Although chains are not used by Shiuli pujaris in Dirih, it is a fact that the *dharom* employs quite violent means during its spirit-possession sessions. And similarly, these are seen as means to make possession by an evil spirit manifest and to eventually exorcise the victim.

*Chait Parob* (*Chait* festival) constitutes ethnographic evidence of such aggressiveness. The festival has been introduced in Dirih-Bhanjara and is celebrated by the devotees only, at the beginning of April. It consists of a collective 'confessing' and 'sin expiating' ritual, which lasts for three days. The climax is reached on the first day, and the other two are spent on individual healing sessions. The *māth* of Lala Soy, where the festival was celebrated in 1999, occupies the whole courtyard of his house. It is divided into two parts: the one nearest to the house corresponds to the entrance, and is the less sacred part. Because of my Christian and beef-eater status, I was allowed in there only, but never in the other part of the *māth* at the far end of the courtyard, where the night sessions were held. This contains a circular shrine, open to devotees only during the festivals of Chait and Dusshera, guarding 'two stones, a bigger and a smaller one' (I must here rely on my informants' description). People told me they were Mahadeo, others Buddha, others Devi, or Devi Mā. As I shall elaborate at the end of this chapter, it is my suggestion that those two stones represent the couple Shiva-

shakti, as well as the couple of Pir saints in the Shiuli dhargah, from which the *dharom* originated. White flags surround the stones, and white and red flags were to be found all over the *māth*.

On the first day, people reached the *māth* with their arms full of fruits or forest products, as a contribution for the evening meal. After they all had tea, they started confessing their 'sins' one by one to the pujari and the whole assembly, in a loud, emphatic, and theatrical way. The pujari then assigned to each 'sinner' the proper penitence - generally a fine to be paid - after sermonising about the do's and don'ts of the issues raised (conjugal quarrels, contraceptive methods, the use of medicines, and the like). Each time, judgements were solemnly agreed upon not only by the individual 'sinner' but also by the whole assembly, and fines were paid, mostly in cash, to the pujari. Thereafter, the 'redeemed' people publicly declared their old and new vows<sup>116</sup>. Next, men and women took a (separate) purificatory bath. They brought some water back, which was offered by the men only to the deities inside the inner shrine (probably to further cool down the deity). A meal was then prepared and shared by the whole community. Although I was present, I was not invited to share the meal, for the same reason which prevented me from joining their night sessions and from entering the sacred space of the *māth*.

After the meal, the number of participants increased and they all eventually moved towards the inner shrine. Soon, the pujaris and their disciples, while facing the closed entrance of the shrine, started to recite mantras, to sing ecstatically, and to play gongs and cymbals more and more hypnotically. At the same time, new adepts were initiated and given a turmeric-anointed sacred thread. Certain mantras were whispered to them, which they repeated incessantly the whole night. Soon the whole congregation joined them. The whole

atmospheres become more and more frantic and ecstatic, with devotees in a trance-like state, and drummers playing their instruments immediately outside the m $\ddot{a}$ th (as members of the Dom caste, they were excluded from it as I was). Eventually, most of the devotees ended up shaking and praying and crying aloud, and either spinning on the ground or jerking up and down while nodding their heads. Until this point, the performance looked like a common spirit-possession session, only slightly more frantic and charged. In fact, the pujaris' atypical behaviour became more and more noticeable with the passing of time: the more the devotees shook, the more the gurus hit them. Those standing were slapped in the face and pushed aside, those sitting were 'crushed' on the ground, and those lying down were kicked and punched. The gurus' wives got especially wild: with their loose hair and shaking bodies, they were dancing and behaving like mad women, and they were beaten, too.

In conclusion, the aim of the whole ritual is to make possession by evil spirits/sins manifest through violence and thereafter to liberate the victims through penitence. What in the afternoon was done through words, at night was performed through spirit possession. The night session corresponds to the exorcism rituals performed by the *dargah*: in both cases, the exorcising power derives from proximity to the shrine and from physical violence.

#### **A 'reformed' saint**

The Muslim *dargah* in northern India represents an aspect of Sufism, the core of which consists of divine love conceptualised as inner experiences of growth and realisation in the relationship between individual worshippers and a Saint (Pinto 1989). Such concepts, developed by Sufi literati, also

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<sup>116</sup> This sort of public confession shows Christian influences.

shape contemporary cults of saints (Bose 1998) and are undoubtedly similar to devotional Hinduism.<sup>117</sup>

The absence of a distinct Hindu and Muslim identity in the exorcism rituals of the dargahs of Gaya district has been recorded by the Bengal District Gazetteers:

*'There are certain forms of worship among Muhammadans which are neither based on the Koran, nor, apparently, adopted from the Hindus. The most common of these is the adoration of departed Pirs. [...] This, however, only represents the standard type of religion of all low caste and ignorant men whether Hindu or Mussalman. The low Mussalman is on very much the same footing as the low caste Hindu.'*  
(O'malley 1906: 78)

Still today, *dargahs* are normally considered indifferently as Hindu guru's temples, or as Muslim saint's tombs (see Gardner 1993; Mayaram 1997). Generally, *dargahs* appear as curious sanctuaries whereby the same figure of a renouncer represents both a Vishnu reincarnation and an intermediary of Allah (Assayag 1995:127) even though there is evidence to show that this is not always the case (see Van der Veer 1992). Indeed, the Shiuli *dargah* is visited by an ever-increasing number of

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<sup>117</sup> The close resemblance of Bahkti with Sufism led some scholars to suggest the possibility of the medieval *bhakti-vada* having borrowed its traits, at least some of them, from the Muhammadan saints of India. On the other hand, empirical observations from other parts of India suggest that Sufi saints' worship is essentially a Hindu institution absorbed by Indian Islam. One such instance is given by a *dargah* near Khuldabad in northern Maharashtra, which is said to be situated precisely on the site of a former temple to the Hindu god Shiva (Bayly 1993: 468-9, n.32). In the same article, the author also enlists a series of Sufi 'cult saints placed within a Hindu sacred landscape' with both Shivaite and Vaishnavite connections (1993: 488-489). As Sufism emphasised the personal charisma of holy men, it could easily interact with other cults of self-made Hindu gods (like Bir Babas). In other words, Sufi saints enable the 'orthodox' Sunni faith to merge with the indigenous culture. Whatever the case may be, these arguments about 'borrowing' between religions imply an earlier stage where 'pure' religions were not mixed together, which is untenable. What I would like to emphasise here is the multifaced nature of the *dharom*, which helps ascertain not only the history and the development of the movement but also its orthodoxy and orthopraxy today.

non-Muslims from surrounding towns and villages as well as from far-away places.

Although both Hindus and Muslims participate in alternative versions of the cult, they however do not engage in syncretism. Indeed, Hindu and Muslim counterparts contest the source of the saint's supernatural powers, at least at a mythological and ideological level. Muslims consider their saint (*dada*)<sup>118</sup> to be the original settler of the village, after having migrated from Sheyalkoti (Sialkot) in Pakistan with his wife, also a saint (*dadi*).<sup>119</sup> Muslim saints are often reported as jungle-clearers. They later allowed the Gau people, shepherds by profession, to settle in the village. Miraculous powers are attributed to the saint. Particular emphasis was given to his having made a young calf milk to the astonishment of the sceptical cattle-herders and to having created water ponds where his arrows landed. His wife was celebrated for her powers connected to fertility. By contrast, the Hindu version of the myth identifies Mahadeo, in the shape of a stone sucking milk from a cow, as the source of miraculous powers.<sup>120</sup>

Sufi origins of the *dharom* are not acknowledged in Dirih-Bhanjara, where the Muslim nature of the cult is in fact dismissed. The only mythological references to the Muslim population in the *dharom*'s myth of origins have negative connotations, being portrayed as an obstacle to *adivasi* participation in the cult. To elaborate, according to the myth, in the village of Shiuli there used to be Mahadeo in the form of a bull-statue (*nandi*, his vehicle). As my informants in Dirih-Bhanjara would very seriously affirm, the statue used to scream and to cry for help during Chait and Dussheera. On

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<sup>118</sup> Common familiar designation of *dargah*'s saints, as well as a Hindu term for 'grandfather.'

<sup>119</sup> According to this version, Sialkoti denotes a geographical place.

<sup>120</sup> Mahadeo, in the shape of a stone, was 'identified' through the fact that the stone was the chosen 'receiver' of cow's milk. Similarly, in mythological accounts from other parts of India, Mahadeo or his *lingam* are recognised because of their receiving milk from cows (see for instance Pocock 1973:84).

those occasions (when the Muslims would make animal sacrifices by the *dargah*) the statue would beg the adivasi to carry it away from Shiuli village and place it in the 'land of the Mundas' instead. However, every time the Mundas responded to this appeal and approached the village, they were sprinkled with blood by its Muslim population and had to retreat. At last, Mahadeo miraculously 'appeared' in the village of Baredih, from where the *dharom* reached Dirih and Bhanjara, in the form of a brick, still worshipped by all devotees who go to Baredih on pilgrimage.<sup>121</sup>

Although Shiuli pujaris, having repeatedly been to Shiuli on pilgrimage, cannot ignore the presence of the Muslim population and the saints' cult, they have never made the Muslim elements explicit, neither to me nor - as far as I know - to the devotees. In everyday life, too, Muslims are depicted with extremely negative tones. It seems legitimate to derive these negative tones from the influence of the Arya Samaj before and of the BJP in the present day. The former became popular among the Gau people of central Bihar in the 1910's and 1920's, just before the *dharom* reached the villagers of Dirih. Besides preventing conversion to Christianity, the Samaj was also and foremost aimed at regaining Muslim devotees to Hinduism - the so-called suddhi movement.<sup>122</sup> It seems thus plausible to suppose that the Mundas adopted a 'reformed' Mahadeo/Saint cult. Not only the reference to the sprinkled blood, but also to the pleading of Mahadeo to be 'saved' from the cow-eater Muslims clearly show the vegetarian nature of the God, which was then imported into Dirih-Bhanjara.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the *dharom*'s gurus openly supported the working of the BJP and their Hindutva ideology during the state elections of September 1999, as the next chapters investigate.

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<sup>121</sup> Jabor Munda, the first witch-finder of the *dharom* to enter Dirih and Bhanjara, came from that village.

<sup>122</sup> In so doing, the Samaj also initiated the cow-protection and the sacred-tread (*jenevo*) movements, which gave the right to wear the sacred thread, the symbol of high caste status, to members of depressed classes (Rao 1979:133-4).

<sup>123</sup> This myth has probably a tribal Bhagat origin: who else would identify tribals as the 'pure' saviours of a vegetarian God from 'impure' Muslims?



### Hindu devotional movements

Devotional Hinduism or *Bhakti* denotes a vehement, absolute devotion to God. What is striven for is a spontaneous attachment for the desired object, God, and for being entirely possessed by and absorbed in Him (see Jash 1982:204). Among the tribal groups of Chota Nagpur, the *Bhakti* movement held sway from the medieval period onwards. The ideas of Kabir and fragments of Vaishnavism from Bengal and Orissa penetrated into Chota Nagpur particularly after Chaitanya had passed through the Jharkhand region on his way from Puri to Vrindaban, 'giving a powerful Vaishnava stimulus to this jungle-clad country in the fifteenth century.' (Sinha 1968:64; see also Roy 1921:176. About Kabir-panth activity among Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi see Lorenzen 1987)

Among the tribal population in particular, 'evidence suggests that adivasi movements of this type started on a large scale in the late nineteenth century. They have continued to this day.' (Hardiman 1984:215; see also Sarkar 1985) The tribal population of Singhbhum district, especially the Hos and the Mundas, has experienced a great number of religious movements, reminding one of a number of 'types', from cargo cults to nativist, reformist, millenarian, and revivalist movements. What these appear to have in common, however, is a devotionalist, or *Bhakti* nature.<sup>124</sup> The influence of *Bhakti* movements among the tribal population is commonly exercised through contact with someone who brought these practices back after living for some time 'outside the jungle', or as a result of the teaching of wandering holy men, usually known as *Bhagats* (devotees).

*Bhagat* movements generally act as powerful vehicles for disseminating modern reformist hostility to sacrifice and show an interesting merging of tribal elements with Shivaite and

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<sup>124</sup> At least from the secondary literature and the documents so far consulted.

Vaishnava ones.<sup>125</sup> From their entrance, the traditional faith generally declines and new gods and beliefs are introduced: 'A *Bhagat* is basically one who has consciously renounced faith in the primitive cult, labelled animistic, and developed faith in Hindu gods and the associated religious principles. Further, he is one who has given up many old practices and taken to new ones that are considered essential requirements of the new faith.' (Singh 1983:313)

The Shiuli *dharom* constitutes no exception: with its shift to 'nominal' Buddhism, the role of Supreme Lord and Guru of the universe has been transferred to Buddha, seen as an incarnation of Ram, Mahadeo, and even Singbonga.<sup>126</sup>

The relevant literature generally depicts Munda and Ho populations of Singhbhum as isolated and detached from contacts with the 'outside world'. The geographical, political, and ethno-cultural insulation of the Hos from other communities was already emphasised by some British writers. With regard to the adoption to Hindu practices, in particular, it was stated that 'the Hos have been rather impervious to millenarian, prophetic, or revivalist cults, and they have been only slightly receptive of non-tribal religious propaganda.' (Singh 1983:431) More recently, it was claimed that 'apart from Buddhho Bhagat, no outstanding messianic leader seems to have arisen among the Hos.' (Fuchs 1965:20)

However, contrary evidence abounds. The same British settlement reports and village notes recorded the existence of a pervasive Hindu influence among the Hos already at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Sen 1999). Moreover, a 'tremendous religious unrest among the Hos' which continues till the present day has been documented, by which some

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<sup>125</sup> The merging of Shaiva elements with Vaishnava *Bhakti* ones is a common Indian phenomenon; see for instance Vaudeville (1987). As for the Shiuli devotees, they have for instance adopted the Ramayana as their sacred text.

movements 'try to reform and revitalise their traditional religious system; while others search for new forms of religion' (Areeparampil undated).

The fact that Mundas and Hos experienced a period of tremendous religious unrest is clearly shown by the great number of new *dharoms*, which have developed since the beginning of the twentieth century and by the drastic break with the 'old system' which most of those movements implied. In particular, the Birsa, Tana Bhagat (Bose 1972:124-49; Roy 1928; Fuchs 1965; Jay 1961:282-322; Sachchidananda 1964:96-104), Haribaba, Tarachand, and Adi Samaj movements gained the greater number of devotees in Singhbhum district, especially among the Hos (Dasgupta 1983).

These movements clearly challenged ancestral practices and preached the rejection of all spirits except the main one, Singbonga. These *dharoms* generally introduced the use of the sacred thread and proscribed meat eating, alcohol drinking, and the use of medicines. When local spirits are retained, they are apparently transformed into vegetarian ones - and assimilated to the Hindu pantheon. The influence, however indirect it may be, of Hindu reformist movements, is evident.

The appearance of all these *dharoms* by the early twentieth century among the tribal population of Jharkhand, especially after the collapse of the armed rebellion of Birsa Munda, can only be understood with reference to the economic and political background of the region, widely dealt with in the previous chapters. In a nutshell, *adivasis* lost control of their ancestral lands and fell into debt. In the area under study, many had to migrate to the Assam tea plantations. In a sense, alien spirits had proved more powerful than local ones and this added a religious dimension to the political and economical unrest.

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<sup>126</sup> As Fuller noted, 'this fluidity -which means that one deity can become many and many deities can become one - is a supremely important

It is my suggestion that the Birsa, Tana Bhagat, and Haribaba movements particularly influenced the Shiuli *dharom*. Indeed, I believe the *dharom* could speculatively even be considered an offshoot of the one or the other. In order to understand today's features of the *dharom*, then, these will have to be traced back to their 'origins'. The Birsa *dharom* originated among the Mundas of Khunti but soon spread among the Hos of Singhbhum, too. Its codes of behaviour and doctrine clearly show Vaishnava and Christian influences. The Tana Bhagat originated among the Oraons, but soon gained adepts among the Hos. The movement passed through a first stage of ecstatic cleansing and purging from old spirits and 'dirty' practices and a second one of building up and consolidating the new faith by prescribing special rules of conduct and giving definite shape to the new doctrine (Dhan 1960:154). Old deities were held responsible for the misery of the present, hence they were expelled from the villages.

The degree of influence exercised upon the devotees is clearly shown by the following quotation: 'It was God's order that henceforth the Oraons should adore God alone through prayer and *Bhakti* or devotion and that they should completely abandon the worship of the minor spirits or bhuts, and do away with animal sacrifice. It was also God's command that they should lead an ascetic life and give up meat, alcoholic drinks, traditional songs and dances, and showy ornaments.' (Singh 1972:426) The quotation could easily be applied to the Shiuli *dharom*.

It is my suggestion that Shiuli songs or some at least, clearly belong to the Tana Bhagat tradition. As a matter of fact, the latter movement is known as 'Tana' because of the repeated use of the verb *tana* (to pull) in their songs ('to pull spirits away'). Yet the same term *tana* is obsessively present in Shiuli songs with apparently the same meaning.

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characteristic of Hindu polytheism' (Fuller 1992:30).

Moreover, we have seen how Mahadeo 'appeared' in the shape of a stone first in Shiuli village, then in Baredih village. Both times, the main gurus had dreamt of the stone, and found it at hand when they awakened. This again has been described as a phenomenon peculiar to the most orthodox among the Tana Bhagats - the Bhuiphut Bhagats (Jay 1961:314 n.1).

Similarly, I believe the Haribaba movement to be a precursor of the Shiuli *dharom*: for both movements, Thursday is their resting and fasting day, their women must bathe twice a day, before cooking, and Brahmanical rules and the use of the sacred thread have been introduced (Singh 1972:428). Moreover, and unlike the other Bhagat movements, both introduced discriminatory rules against the non-*adivasis*. And finally, as with the *dharom*, the *raison d'être* of the Haribaba movement consisted in the purge of local spirits and witches, with Haribaba witch-finders being called in to 'cleanse' entire villages: 'a hectic search for them in all places and things is launched amidst a cacophony of deafening sounds, of feverish drumming, and ceaseless beating of gongs, the exuberant disciples jumping and dancing all along' (Singh 1963:289). Again, in like manner with the *dharom*, kitchens and graveyards were considered as the most dangerous sacred spaces. Thus, during these frantic hunts, every fireplace was dug up and all cooking-pots were smashed and graveyards were dismantled, in the search for 'evil' spirits (Singh 1963:293).

At the same time, however, the Shiuli *dharom* appears to drastically differ from the movements cited earlier in its radical rupture with the past and with local spirits. As a matter of fact, Tana Bhagat, Haribaba and Birsa movements accomplished a revitalisation and reform of local spirits rather than their rejection. Although they hit at the roots of certain features of the old system, and emphasised the need to destroy and substitute it with a new order, yet all local spirits were retained by transforming them from carnivorous

into vegetarian. Whenever old spirits had been expelled, it was precisely because of their supposed alien nature, rather than vice-versa: this was the case of the Tana Bhagat who considered their old spirits as in fact belonging to the Mundas, the original forest-clearers of their villages (Jay 1961:294). Besides, the cult of the ancestors and the use of graveyards have been retained. Finally, among the Haribabas, the past as well as the 'path of the ancestors' underwent a transformation, but never a rejection.<sup>127</sup>

This clearly contrasts with the devotees' ideology. devotees replaced all spirits with new, imported beliefs and practices coming from the land of the *diku*. I lack evidence to suggest any reason for the Shiuli ideology to be so different from other local reform movements. Further research, of a comparative kind, is needed in this field.

Another main difference relates to the millennial nature of these movements. Among the devotees, a resurgence of the tribal 'golden age' is not looked for. What devotees want is a modern and civilised society. By contrast, *Bhagat* movements' reason d'être consists in the restoration of their 'tribal kingdom', having arisen in times of acute land dispossession and exploitation at the hands of immigrant landlords. In Vaishnavism, the idea of a future saviour is intimately connected with the doctrine of the avatars or incarnations of the god, Vishnu. Gandhi was soon considered by many an incarnation of Vishnu. He appeared to have been impressed by the Tana and the Birsaites Bhagats when he made his first acquaintance with the Hos at Chaibasa and the Mundas at Khunti in 1925 (Singh 1963:284). With the passing of time,

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<sup>127</sup> Similarly, among the Haribaba, the sacred forest was subject to a cleansing session, after which its sacredness was reconfirmed. By contrast, the devotees abandoned it *tout court*. But most importantly, the authority of village priests had not been undermined: somehow, then, their legitimacy as guardians of the primordial link between land, spirits, and people was maintained. By contrast, the *dharom* developed precisely out of a frantic search for the 'proper' priests. Today, Dirih and Bhanjara still lack an 'official' priest and different clan headmen officiate ritual sacrifices.

both movements appropriated the figure of Gandhi into their ideologies: he became an *avatara* of their messiahs, and his national movement was assimilated to their fight against dispossessing landlords.

The reaction to Gandhi's Chotanagpur tour gave rise to a further upsurge of local millenarian and bhagat movements: 'to the tribals, he appeared like a *bhagat*. He spoke in predominantly *Bhakti* idioms of Ram Rajia, of the efficacy of Ramnama, of the service of the Dridranarayan (God in the shape of the poor) [...], of temperance, purity, and of a personal God, as one of their own bhagat leaders [...], of independence and freedom (*swaraj*), of a new order, of a new moral idiom. So new dimensions were added to tribal movements' (Singh 1970: 13). Gandhi's message soon spread all over Chotanagpur, and towards the end of 1928 new Gandhi-inspired religions developed among the Santhals of Hazaribagh and the Hos of Singhbhum. In 1941, Gandhi paid another visit to the Chota Nagpur plateau, and again 'his visit made a profound impression on social movements among the [...] tribes.' (Singh 1970: 12) And again, new Bhagat movements developed, among the Gonds in Surguja (1951), and some Oraons called Danha Bhagats (Sahay 1962:22-3; Roy: 1928). Similar movements have been reported from tribal regions all over India (see for instance Hardiman 1984). The Ram Rajya represented to the tribals a state full of millenarian possibilities, and the National Movement provided the context in which the tribal population could carry on its own struggles in local idioms to achieve particular ends (Sarkar 1985: 136-164)<sup>128</sup>. Gandhi was locally translated into a millenarian figure, and his fight against the colonial power into resistance to Hindu landlords.

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<sup>128</sup> Moreover, before and after Independence, a number of interventions for the welfare of tribal groups emerged. Among these, village and cottage industries and forest co-operation societies were taken from Gandhi's reconstruction programme. As such, 'these centres projected powerfully the image of Gandhi as *Disum Aba* (Father of the Nation) and brought a sizeable section of the tribals, apart from the *bhagat* [who already were] into the mainstream of the national movement' (Singh 1970: 8).

Not so for the Shiuli *dharom*, however. Avatāras of Vishnu are generally placed by the myths at the time of transition from one yuga (cosmic period linked to a particular state of perfection or degradation of dharma) to another: they provoke the destruction of humanity through war so as to enable the world to start anew (Biardeau 1989: 102-3). In all the above-mentioned movements (except the Haribaba), their founders acquired messianic features. Similarly, the Hindu tradition has reinterpreted Buddha as avatāra of Vishnu, and as such, the Buddha has been given the role of restorer of the dharmic order. Nonetheless, the Shiuli devotees appear to lack millenarian expectations, presumably because their ideology focuses on the 'here and now', as the following chapters will show. Although they acknowledge the human nature of Buddha, and often referred to the likelihood that he might come back to earth one day, yet no mention was ever made of *kaliyuga* or cosmic regeneration. They do not strive for the restoration of a mythical age or golden past. In fact, for them, the past has only to be forgotten.

#### **Gautam Buddha and the 'rules' of the *dharom***

The Bodh *dharom* represents the first recorded case of 'conversion' to Buddhism among the tribal population of Jharkhand or at least of the Singhbhum district. I believe a distinction should however be made between Buddhism and the *dharom*, notwithstanding the fact that the devotees worship Gautam Buddha and that they all define themselves as Buddhists and register as such at the censuses.<sup>129</sup> As already seen, the Bhagwan has a multiple significance for the devotees, being at the same time Buddha, Singbonga, Mahadeo, and a reincarnation of Vishnu.<sup>130</sup> And Buddhism is only one component of this multi-faceted movement.

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<sup>129</sup> Only a small number of Buddhists was reported in the 1950-60 Census of Singhbhum district.

<sup>130</sup> As such, Ghurye's assertion that: 'Buddha, another ascetic canonized as Vishnu's incarnation, is no longer an object of worship in India' is proved to be false (Ghurye 1953: 40).



A possible yet speculative explanation for the Buddhist element of the *dharom* might be linked to the fact that most of the Tana Bhagats, of which the Shiuli *dharom* could reasonably be considered an offshoot, joined the Indian National Congress political party and played a prominent part in the non-co-operation movement launched by Gandhi. As such, they joined the party's activities at the local headquarters in Gaya (O'Malley 1906), where it is likely that they entered into contact with local Buddhist monks. An additional (and classical) explanation consists in the work of wandering sadhus or monks belonging to different religious traditions and exercising their influence upon the tribal population in different periods of time. This hypothesis would also be supported by the fact that Shiuli people - and exclusively the Shiuli people in the whole area - use the term *māth* to indicate their temples.<sup>131</sup>

Moreover, Buddhism had always been present in Bihar. Yet it was only in the years 1951-61 that the Neo-Buddhist leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar inspired a new wave of mass conversions (Shastree 1995: 2). However, the *dharom* entered the village long before Ambedkar started his activities. Moreover, my informants never referred to Ambedkar nor to his ideology, i.e., to the fact that 'Buddhism is an indigenous Indian religion of equality; a religion which was anti-caste and anti-Brahman' (Lynch 1972:99). In fact, if anything, the Shiuli *dharom* reinforces hierarchical values rather than emphasising equality.

Although Buddhist ideology, like devotionism, appears to imply a negation of hierarchical social values if not of Hinduism itself, yet ethnographic evidence shows that the devotional worship of Buddha among devotees is supportive of inequality. On the one hand, to be a Buddhist means a break

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<sup>131</sup> The term *māth* generally defines a monastery for sadhus or sannyasi, and in Gaya it is usually located within the compounds of Buddhist monasteries. Similarly, among the devotees, *māths* have monastic

with the local dominant structure of social relations and hence with the traditional system.<sup>132</sup> Yet on the other hand, the modalities by which this is attained reproduce the value of hierarchical ritual status defined by relative purity through the adoption of Brahmanical values and codes of behaviour.

The Shiuli ideology reinforces caste notions rather than being opposed to them. Indeed, the *dharom* is undergoing a process of caste formation. It seems therefore plausible to read the *dharom* as a route to social uplift vis-à-vis the neighbouring Mundas and Rautias rather than as a means of resistance to hierarchical values. Their struggle for fundamental change in relation to others is a struggle for higher status and prestige within and between communities.

As many other devotionalist movements, Shiuli people do not renounce caste and are to all effects householders. The sacred landscape gives evidence of the fact that among devotees the boundary between householder and ascetic is blurred. Māths are located in the courtyard of the guru's house, so that the boundary between living space and sacred space is blurred.<sup>133</sup> The idea of celibacy is not entertained and gurus encourage bachelors to marry, to assure the social reproduction of the *dharom*. I clearly remember the 'confession' of one woman during *Chait parob*: she felt the need to admit she was taking natural contraceptives and her behaviour was interpreted as a great sin both by the pujari and the other devotees. Likewise, among the holy men and their disciples, celibacy

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characteristics and gurus' disciples permanently inhabit them until they get married.

<sup>132</sup> Many are the instances which make such breaks explicit. One is the use of the term *māth*, as it indicates Shiuli temples only. Surrounding Hindu communities use the general term *mandir* for their temples or shrines, and Munda non-devotees have no shrines at all, the sacred forest being, as they say, the place where spirits can be met if properly treated. Hence, the use of the term *māth* differentiates Shiuli devotees from 'the others'.

<sup>133</sup> Similar instances are given by the members of the Pushti Marga (Path of Grace) or similarly by the Ramanandis' *rasiks* in Ayodhya: also defined as 'sweet devotionalists,' they are entirely sedentary, and live in their house/temples. They do not hold celibacy as an ideal, contract marriages, and have children (see Fuller 1992:167-172).

does not seem to be a value. On the contrary, they conduct a normal marital life. It is however a fact that most of the younger disciples appear to prefer a celibate life.

### ***Austerity and discipline as a way to 'civilisation'***

Devotees identify themselves as Buddhist by referring to the set of rules they follow. These, however, also correspond to more general high-caste Hindu codes of conduct. Indeed, it would be difficult and probably also misleading to identify the 'origins' of those rules: we are dealing with an instance of cultural diffusion between traditions with differing orthodoxies yet with converging practices and local interpretations.

To the Devotees, to be and to become a Buddhist implies a number of renunciations. In order to 'convert' to the *dharom*, he/she has to make a vow and follow these prescriptions:

Not to eat meat and to use violence;  
Not to be jealous of others' wealth;  
Not to be dishonest;  
Not to have a greedy nature;  
Not to drink alcohol.

These prohibitions correspond to the so-called Five Precepts of Buddhism, i.e. orthodox doctrinal prescriptions, which define a Buddhist layman (See Obeyesekere 1968:27).<sup>134</sup> In the original Pali texts, the Precepts are quite general. As such, they can accommodate to the morality of different village communities, and of different caste and class groupings. Historically, their flexibility has allowed the spread of Buddhism.

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<sup>134</sup> The Five Precepts, in the original Pali texts, are the following:  
Abstinence from the destruction of life;  
Abstinence from taking what is not given;  
Abstinence from fornication;  
Abstinence from speaking falsely;  
Abstinence from spirituous, strong, and maddening liquors which are the cause of sloth.

Orthodox Buddhism is heterogeneous and presents two main divisions: Theravada Buddhism (*hinayana*) and Mahayana Buddhism, with each of them having further internal differentiation. The Shiuli *dharom* appears to be a rather simplistic form of Buddhism, with no clear connection to either of the main schools. Only the *dharom*'s 'obsession' with rules makes it similar to Theravada Buddhism. At the same time, however, the Theravada ideology clearly diverges from the Shiuli one, as it does not contemplate the possibility of anybody but Buddha ever reaching nirvana.

The Shiuli attitude to rules is certainly idiosyncratic. In a sense, they are experienced as a sort of self-sacrifice. Rules are invented continuously: in addition to the above list, there are dozens of additional newly created and self-imposed restrictions, which people ostensibly follow. Moreover, while enlisting those rules, or while making them up for the first time, it was always a not-to rather than a to do, which was emphasised. In the spiritual domain, for example, it is more a matter of which spirits are not worshipped, rather than vice-versa, so that people were often irritated by my inquiring about the names of the Gods they worshipped. The fact that the giving up of animal sacrifices leads to 'civilisation' is a well-documented phenomenon in the Indian context (see Pocock 1973:74). More than that, however, there is a sense in which public conversion to the *dharom* implies a public renunciation of all desires and pleasures of life which, devotees would emphatically say, are widely enjoyed among the non-devotees. The more numerous and the stricter the rules, the greater the social and religious gap between them and the non-devotees. With their concentration of 'do not' precepts, the Shiuli ethos does indeed appear to have a peculiarly Buddhist nature.

Rather than asceticism, it ultimately appears to be a matter of austerity. As Rasai repeatedly told me, 'high thinking in

simple life'. He even wrote this sentence in big letters on the wall of the 'guest-house' of the village. To him, that sentence was like a badge of the *dharom*'s essence. Yet, the same could be said of any monastic order. Moreover, it is also reminiscent of the Sufi dictum: 'my poverty, my pride' (*faqrī fakhrī*). By behaving in an austere way, devotees somehow become, as they say, more 'civilised' (English word).

Eventually, it is all a matter of which rules to be freed from. Devotees associate the wild with backwardness and with the non-devotees' 'looseness' of behaviour: their women join night dances and move freely, they get intoxicated, they 'consume all the food and money they have on a daily basis without thinking about the future'. Ultimately, there appears to be a contradictory notion of forest (and wilderness): for the renouncer, it is a place where to attain liberation. For devotees, it has negative connotations and is a place from which to be freed.

Wilderness, lack of self-restraint, and discipline ultimately lead to greed: as devotees often commented, non-devotees use their house spirits to steal their neighbours' harvest. As they say, they are as greedy as their spirits, who always ask for chicken and goat meat, and yet are never satisfied by it. Accordingly, Pauri Devi is greedy, as she always cries for human blood. According to another legend, Pauri used to give rice to those in need, who would then give it back to her when the harvest allowed. Yet, she suddenly stopped lending rice to the people, as the rice she got back from them was black, whereas she liked white rice only. People would emphasise the greed shown by such behaviour. The fact that ancestral practices are acknowledged as being far more expensive than those of the *dharom* is always explained with reference to the greed of spirits, *vis-à-vis* the austerity of the Buddha.

In contrast, what really matters to the devotees is to show that they have discipline, hence that they are virtuous and

are due respect, especially in relation to their non-convert fellows. As mentioned before, devotees' attitude towards rules is one of obsession. This might derive from the sense of discipline that exists in Buddhism and the 227 Precepts of the Book of Discipline, which ordained monks have to adhere to. For the monks, the purpose of all rules is to be removed from the world of ordinary affairs, i.e., to attain salvation. Instead, for the laymen, the goal is heaven, even though, as Obeyesekere noted, 'for many Sinhalese Buddhists the most desired reward for meritorious living is that which takes the form of a satisfactory future life on earth' (1968:29). Similarly, adherence to the norms of the *dharom* appears to be aimed at the avoidance of sufferings in the 'here and now' rather than in the after-life. Hence, the more the rules are, the more chance to be disciplined, and the more misfortunes are kept under control.

As freedom from suffering is attained through adherence to its religious prescriptions, the *dharom* can be defined as a 'salvation religion,' i.e., as 'a state or condition achieved through religious means in which suffering has been eliminated' (Obeyesekere 1968:12). This is achieved through respecting (*manatin*) the rules (note the double meaning of *manatin*: to respect, to worship). Or vice-versa, transgression of certain rules implies the inevitability of sufferings. Accordingly, devotees have developed a concept of 'sin' which appears to correspond to Obeyesekere's definition of it, as a 'violation of a religious tenet' (1968:7-40).

The notion of sin presupposes that of the 'ethicization of the religious life' or 'the process by which ethical values come to be incorporated into a previously amoral religious ideology'.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, this appears to constitute one of the

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<sup>135</sup> Obeyesekere is here using Weber's expression (Obeyesekere 1968: 12).

main changes brought about by the *dharom*.<sup>136</sup> Interestingly enough, the term for sin is *papi*, a Hindi word. I heard devotees use the term several times, whereas non-devotees would instead use the expression *galti* (to make a mistake or to commit a fault). I believe this semantic difference reflects a distinctly different way of perceiving offences: whereas devotees refer to an accepted moral order, the non-devotees would instead refer to customary law upheld case-by-case by village or lineage councils.

Discipline in the obeisance to rules derived from Buddhism, and the adoption of the Hindu doctrine of metempsychosis, by which humans can indeed become Gods, appear to constitute the two main pillars of Shiuli's salvation ideology as they represent the paths by which devotees can strive to reach *nirvana*.

In a sense then, devotees' obsession with rules might be seen as an instance of what Weber defined as 'rational legitimacy': at the level of ideology, they have identified the new rules as providing a new legitimacy which replaces the traditional one deriving from ancestral practices. At the same time, obsession with rules and restrictions become a sort of self-sacrifice that reminds us of Parry's suggestion about renunciation and unreciprocated gifts as a means to salvation in world religions (Parry 1986:467-8). Indeed, the next chapters will show how the passage from a religious system proper of a small-scale tribal society to a historical world religion is encouraging dramatic changes in the whole ideology of gift and exchange. In turn, we will also see how these changes are reflected in the sphere of social organisation and kinship relations.

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<sup>136</sup> The ancestral eschatology lacks the ethical aspect characterising the Hindu doctrine of *karma* (from Sanskrit *karman*, "act"), which conceives metempsychosis as determined by man's actions in a previous life. By contrast, Mundas appear to understand the concept of metempsychosis as spirit possession - by souls of people who died 'outside the house' and willing to 'harm' new generations.

## **Rupture, transformations, and continuities**

The *dharom* shows some continuities and transformations with ancestral beliefs and practices. However, what is particularly illuminating is, I believe, what has in fact been rejected.<sup>137</sup> Devotees explicitly aim at forgetting and neglecting worship of forest spirits, village spirits and house spirits. The following paragraphs provide ethnographic evidence of this neglecting efforts, while the last part of the section deals with continuities and transformations.

### **Rupture**

Devotees neglect forest spirits and related village festivals, like Maghe Parob and Bā Parob: they either avoid joining them or they neglect their most significant components, such as sacrificial offerings, social drinking of rice-beer and the provisions of contributions (*chanda*) to the festivals, which are read as offerings to the 'wrong' God.<sup>138</sup>

Moreover, due to the *dharom*'s influence, traditional festivals are undergoing what Sinha defined a process of 'attenuation' (Sinha 1968). The lack of an 'official' village priest in Dirih-Bhanjara contributes to the weakening of spiritual knowledge and practice. Even though household rituals are still performed by non-devotees, they are often not officiated by the household head, but by priests from surrounding villages.

The following are some ethnographic instances of the devotees' 'desertion' of village festivals and their neglect to worship village spirits.

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<sup>137</sup> I am here relying on Tambiah's definition of 'continuities', as the 'persistence of certain structures or customs from the past into the present,' and of 'transformations' as 'systematic changes in forms over time, both in the historical past and between a structure and that currently observed' (1970: 4).

<sup>138</sup> As in all monotheistic religions, Buddha is a jealous God.



### ***Instances of changed practices: the Maghe Parob***

*Maghe parob* (lit. festival of vulgarities) constitutes the main festival of the Mundas. It celebrates harvesting and fertility and has often been described as a large bacchanal. It consists in the calling of all forest and village spirits into the sacred grove of the village through sexual invitations and the consequent offering of animal sacrifices to them. Its songs, dances, and ritual chants revolve around sexuality and devotees associate them with impurity.

During the Maghe Parob of February 1999, some Shiuli devotees followed the procession leading from the village to the sacred forest. However, they did not enter the sacred forest and witnessed the ritual from a distance. In addition, they later took a purificatory bath. As for dancing activities connected to the festival, only unmarried youngsters participated. A few married and unmarried convert women did briefly join the afternoon dances, yet they danced separately from the non-devotees. No child of convert households was to be seen amongst them. In contrast, non-convert women danced all night long, and joined the dances of neighbouring villages on the following days. Indeed, these 'dance migrations' constitute the main occasions for flirting and 'marital' abductions (marriage by capture). By contrast, night dances are especially feared and discountenanced by Shiuli people as immoral and backward.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, devotees associate female night-dance with witches' clandestine meetings and activities, which are said to occur at night - though they consist in anti-clockwise group dancing while 'regular' dances proceed clock-wise. It is not a coincidence then that all the non-convert women are identified with witchcraft, as the next chapters will argue.

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<sup>139</sup> Mina, my host family's daughter, was never taught to dance, while I clearly remember dozens of young girls imitating their elder sisters' and mothers' dancing movements during these festivals. Yet, her grandfather used to remark Mina's absence from the dancing ground with pride. Similarly, I remember my own attempts at joining night dances being ostracised by my convert family: as I was living in a convert house, I was theoretically forbidden to join night dances.

### ***The Bā parob***

The *Bā Porob* (lit. flower festival), the Mundas' New Year, celebrates the blooming of Sal tree flowers. In Dirih and Bhanjara, the festival was made to coincide with the Holi festival, belonging to the Hindu tradition. Because the majority of Hindu festivities are astronomically fixed in terms of the lunar calendar, the festival was celebrated earlier than usual, hence before the blooming of Sal flowers. Although non-convert people still performed the ritual procession to the forest to collect the flowers necessary for the worship, they could only gather leaves and sprouts. Moreover, the whole festival underwent a process of 'attenuation' as it was mainly children who took part in the procession. No collective ritual was performed, though it appears that at the household level all due rituals were indeed performed. Next, dancing and singing activities followed, which were thoroughly enjoyed by the convert men. These activities had a characteristically '*Holi*' flavour: powder colours were thrown by convert youngsters onto their mates, and gender roles were purposely inverted, with women beating and hitting men while dancing- sometimes even severely, and with some males dressing up and behaving like women.

In sum, *Bā-Parob* appears to be well on the way to being displaced by the *Holi* festival.

### ***The Chait parob***

Among the converts, *Chait parob* constitutes the main festival<sup>140</sup>. Introduced in the area by the devotees, it is not conceptualised as a 'village festival', with devotees from surrounding villages joining the main celebrations.

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<sup>140</sup> Chait Parob or Chaitra Parva is a popular folk festival observed especially in Orissa in honour of Lord Siva.

I clearly remember non-convert people passing by, driven by curiosity, and glancing at the m $\ddot{a}$ th with perplexity. Unless one was willing to look through its high and thick gates, which impede people from looking at the performances from a distance, the voices, the singing, and the noise in general was all that was communicated to the outside. For the whole night, only the frantic singing and the loud sound of cymbals and gongs, with hypnotic and trance-inducing rhythm, were to be heard. I then recalled the gate-less sacred forest, where ancestral rituals are performed, in the light of the day for everybody to enjoy, and the all-night playing of drums, inviting the laziest villagers to join the dances. I remembered noticing the contrast between the grave and the monotonous tone of the night-drums, which often lulled me into a sound sleep, and the devotees' acute and oscillating rhythm of cymbals and gongs that created both frenzy and disassociation. Finally, I appreciated the difference between 'traditional' group dances, whereby men and women interlock their arms to form long lines, oscillating back and forth simultaneously, and the individualistic nature of the session I was witnessing, in which each participant stood in a trance-like state. In a way, I felt the social and religious distinctiveness of the *dharom* was replicated and confirmed once more by the loud noise and by those gates which impeded visual participation.

***Other instances of changed practices: abandoning forest and house spirits***

Together with collective rituals, ancestor worship and related household rituals have been abandoned. The spirits of the dead are neither ritually called back into the house nor transformed into 'proper' ancestors, even in the case of good death. Instead, they are all indiscriminately conceptualised as having a malevolent nature. Devotees on some occasions even denied their existence and avoided mentioning their names. As such, they (especially young people) would often use the Hindi term *bhut* when talking about them, without

distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' spirits. In Hinduism, *bhuts* are said to be malignant and repeatedly turn up to frighten the living if they have died a violent death or have been denied funeral rites. They haunt trees, deserts, abandoned houses, the hearths and roofs of homes, crossroads, boundaries, and graveyards. Similarly, ancestral spirits are conceptualised as dwelling especially in close proximity to graves.<sup>141</sup> Hence, burial grounds are avoided and feared by old and new generations alike.<sup>142</sup> This attitude sharply contrasts with the one of non-devotees, who are easily glimpsed while working, playing, or relaxing nearby or on gravestones. As the previous chapter showed, graveyards are the space where the social reproduction of the clan is symbolically attained. And it is precisely by the graveyards that *Maghe parob* used to be held in the past.

Chapter Eight investigates in detail the transformation of the sacred landscape among devotees: the kitchen stops being the place where the social reproduction of the lineage is symbolically nurtured. Similarly, burial grounds lose their sacredness, i.e., they stop being the place where clan existence and continuity is sanctioned by the supernatural and where the link with the living is ritually played out. On the contrary, they are feared, avoided, and in some extreme cases even abandoned, with people being buried in their own garden instead.

### **Continuity and transformation**

The break with the ancestral past is particularly attained at the ideological level. The devotees' orthodoxy, i.e., their explicit intention to forget and reject ancestral teachings and to replace them with 'foreign' codes of behaviour, plays, I believe, a fundamental role in the understanding of the kind

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<sup>141</sup> This is where the ancestors' spirit hangs around immediately after the burial and before being ritually 'called back in the house' soon after.

<sup>142</sup> The same fear is felt with respect to all local spirits in general. Because the sacred forest of the village is the abode of the village spirits, it is strictly avoided by devotees, too, just like graveyards are.

of 'rupture' brought about by the *dharom*. Obviously enough, there are in practice some continuities. After all, the same term Bhagwan indicates simultaneously Buddha, but also Mahadeo, Ram, and Singbonga<sup>143</sup>. Women in particular would affirm that 'Bhagwan is the Moon, the Sun, Ram, Bhudd, and Singbonga' (Chami Lowada, 29.3.1999). Both are Supreme Creators, unknowable, unqualified, formless, and distant from their devotees' mundane life.

Singbonga is commonly called 'the old man'. He is the primordial ancestor.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, he is the Sun and the Moon. As such, people say, he is everywhere, and thus there cannot possibly be any temples dedicated to him. Apparently, the localisation of celestial great Gods in temple sites is commonly resolved by referring to myths which situate God at those particular sites (Fuller 1992:37-8). In the case of the Mundas, however, this localisation appears never to have taken place. It is true that Singbonga's favourite -yet not at all permanent- dwelling place corresponds to the eldest Sal tree in the sacred forest, yet his presence in that site is never taken for granted. Moreover, the forest is the dwelling space of village spirits, especially the tutelary spirit of the village (Deshauli bonga) and the place where they can be contacted. For instance, during the main festival of Maghe, people ritually resort to sexual invitations in order to 'convince' village spirits to momentarily join them in the sacred forest to listen to their prayers and accept their offerings. Finally, the sacred forest is never the site for individual worship: only collective village rituals are performed within its boundaries. In other words, the forest appears to lack the characteristics of a Hindu temple. After

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<sup>143</sup> Needless to say, it is a matter of a single Bhagwan with multiple identities', each of which being distinctively emphasised according to the circumstances.

<sup>144</sup> In the sacred forest, he is usually worshipped as 'old man' (*Haram*), together with his consort, 'the old lady of the grove' (*Jaher Buri*). Together, they form the ancestral couple of the Mundas, which is likely to correspond to the Shiva-Shakti pairing, whose tameness is confirmed and emphasised by their 'old age.' Apparently the female deities of the sacred groves are generally identified as Parvati, her incarnations or prototypes.

all, people themselves never addressed it as a temple. Old convert women would react to my enquiries with surprise, and comment that God is too immense to be 'trapped': 'He is everywhere, how could he possibly be in one place only?'

Similarly, non-devotees do not have any kind of representation of the divine. Neither stones nor trees are worshipped as containing 'some or all of the deity's power', as is generally the case in Hinduism (Fuller 1995:59-61). Although sacrifices are generally conducted at the foot of some old trees, what is worshipped is the transcendent and unqualified divine (*nirguna*) rather than the immanent one (*saguna*). I never witnessed trees being objects of devotion or of particular care. In fact, it is the whole forest and its permanent water springs that appear to be addressed to during ritual performances. Although this lack of use of images in worship recalls the anti-idolatry workings of the Arya Samaj (and the Vedas), I believe there is no direct connection between the two. First, the lack of images was simply taken for granted by my informants, as something absolutely natural and unchanged 'since the beginning'. Second, the lack of sacred images appears to be a common phenomenon among the Mundas elsewhere.

Similarly, Buddha is said to be everywhere, yet to keep at a distance from the devotees' every day life. Unlike Singbonga, however, Buddha was never portrayed as primordial ancestor, but as the famous prince of the Buddhist sacred texts. People would proudly recall the history of Gautam Buddha's revelation, and never link it with their own history. Moreover, Buddha is a vegetarian God, whereas Singbonga is no doubt a carnivorous spirit, so much that young devotees would often maintain that his name is in fact *Sim* (fowl)-bonga, or the 'spirit that requires fowls'. But most of all, Buddha is the guardian spirit of 'morality'. This, as we saw above, led to an 'ethicization of the religious life' that was unknown to non-devotees. Finally, he has no consort, no female

counterpart. In other words, he is the ascetic, austere, non-violent and vegetarian god par excellence.

Whereas Buddha and Singbonga lay at the extreme ends of a hypothetical dietary continuum, Mahadeo has instead been transformed into a vegetarian God. In his Mahadeo form, the Bhagwan is meat-eater for the bongaburu people, and vegetarian for the others. As we have already seen, the transformation took place with conversion to the *dharom*. It is my suggestion that adoption of vegetarian Mahadeo helps to explain the coexistence of a simultaneously carnivorous and vegetarian 'Bhagwan': the devotees simply worship a 'reformed' Singbonga.

Not only Buddha and Singbonga relate differently to food but also to women. Buddha is unmarried whereas Singbonga has a female counterpart, the 'Old lady of the grove'. And goddesses are bloodthirsty, hence the relation between marital status and diet. Both Shaiva and Vaishnava theologies recognise the divine to be simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Immanent divine is represented by Shakti, and refers to the feminine, manifest and acknowledged. In relation to Shakti, Shiva is the transcendent and masculine Supreme Being (yet he can be *saguna* whenever he is made manifest through his icons) (Pocock 1973:88). Or, to put it differently, goddesses personify the active and dynamic female principle (*prakriti*) whereas gods embody the passive male principle (*purusha*) (Fuller 1992:44). Shakti can be put under control by marrying the gods. Yet, gods must be disassociated from their bloodthirsty consorts to control their powers. This is the case of the vegetarian and unmarried Buddha. However, during Cheit parob, the goddess is worshipped, yet as a married and positive goddess, who does not require animal sacrifices - which would 'heat' her further - (Fuller 1992:85).

### Clothing the naked girl as a British man: the masculinisation of religion

As the austere, ascetic, and non-violent Buddha has replaced the feminine energy of the divine, one could argue for a 'masculinisation' of religion. Along the same lines, all female spirits or deities of the Munda ancestral cosmology (Chandi bonga, Nage-era, Churil bonga, Deshauli bonga, Jaher Buri, and Pauri Devi and other forest spirits) have acquired a negative connotation, being associated with witchcraft.

Still associated with particular landscapes, female goddesses represent a constant danger, being capricious, irascible and prone to turn into their Kali or Durga form simply by being disturbed. Because of their being unmarried and independent, their powers are deployed 'free of male constraint' (Fuller 1992: p.41). Unlike wifely goddesses, they are conceptualised as ferocious and uncontrollably destructive: the more so as no animal sacrifices are offered to them by devotees. The latter fear them tremendously: their worship has indeed been abandoned, as they had been shown to be too uncontrollable, and people avoid passing by their sites and even mentioning their names<sup>145</sup>.

Unmarried and wild goddesses do constitute a permanent threat. They can be ignored, but not destroyed or removed. Those who worship them are immediately accused of witchcraft and are said to fall victims to madness. Witchcraft is seen as the inversion of motherhood and wives, but also unmarried daughters and mothers, can turn into witches. As 'my brother' Virendra once told me, Shiva was sitting on the threshold of

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<sup>145</sup> At the same time, however, they have neither been transformed into vegetarian deities nor expelled from the village. One reason might be that not everybody converted to the *dharom*, and those non-devotees would have strongly opposed it. Or alternatively, that the local and geographically rooted character of those spirits makes them 'immovable' (indeed, most of them are represented by the oldest trees of the village, a clear symbol of immobility). However, one can only speculate on this matter. The fact is that nobody ever appears to question their existence or their carnivorous and greedy nature ('not contenting themselves with sweets' would be the devotees' typical comment). Instead of appeasing them, they simply ignore them.



his house one night to check whether his wife Parvati was going out in the dark and transform into *Najom-era* ('the poisonous woman', i.e., a witch) as he had been told. He then fell asleep but was immediately woken up by his wife bumping into him, in her attempt to go out of the house. He tried to stop her by putting his legs on her chest, but she aggressively put her tongue out and transformed into Kali!

In order to face their uncontrollable female Shakti power, female deities must either be 'cooled down' or they must be spoken of in male terms. When married, a deity is subordinate to her husband, with her powers depending on him. By getting married, she acquires positive connotations. Whereas unmarried deities' unreleased sexual energy is seen as destructive, married deities' sexual power is seen as fertility, hence as linked to agricultural reproduction as well as human reproduction. Married deities are seen as nurturing, as mothers.

The only female spirit that has retained a positive nature among the devotees is 'Mother Rice' (Baba Enga). At a household level, Mother Rice is celebrated at the beginning of the harvesting season (Kolom Bonga), yet as a vegetarian deity. Some Hinduised Mundas talk about Mother Rice in terms of Lakshmi. During the ritual, the matron of the house identifies with her, and ritually 'enters the house' (*owa bolo*) with a pot of water, i.e., to bring prosperity.

At a collective level, Mother Rice is worshipped by the devotees on Chait and Dusshera, where she is conceptualised as the tamed Parvati, thus ceasing to be a potential source of danger. Instead of animal sacrifices, she is offered (and maybe bathed with) water, to further 'cool her' together with flowers and other forest products. It is on those occasions only that the devotees experience and worship the feminine divine.

Plate 10: Animal sacrifice during *Kolom Bonga*



Plate 11: 'Mother Rice' enters and brings water into the house



Conversely, Pauri Devi is kept under control by talking about her in male terms. Traditionally described as a young girl with long black hair, either naked or with a tiger's skin around her waist, devotees would instead portray her as a 'white woman dressing like a man, with British army pants and a British hat'. Many devotees admitted casual and peaceful encounters with her and on those occasions, it transpired that her name was in fact Sukanram, a male name.<sup>146</sup> She was as powerful and alien as British officials used to be. But most importantly, she too was a ruler.

Pauri is said to have given some rules to the inhabitants of Dirih-Bhanjara to follow. We have seen how religion is perceived in terms of an exchange, a contract (*nyam*) between people and the supernatural. Apparently, Pauri Devi does not like bananas, bricks, drums, horses, and does not allow members of other castes in Dirih-Bhanjara. A purely speculative and interpretative approach would highlight the fact that these rules too appear to be aimed at keeping the goddess 'cool'. Drums are generally connected to dancing activities, which the devotees despise for their sexual implications. The fact that Pauri does not like horses anymore, although she used to ride a white horse in the past signifies a 'change' from her tantric past, too. Finally, one of the favourite narratives revolves around the mistreatment that Pauri reserved for some non-Mundas living in the village: attacked and killed by bears, they all abandoned their houses (and lands) and settled somewhere else.

In other words, devotees have made a new 'contract' with the deity. As long as the contract is respected and they do not disregard the rules, the deity is supposed to maintain her appeased, disciplined, and 'civilised' or masculine form.

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<sup>146</sup> The fact that friends and relatives had reported similar encounters with Pauri in neighbouring villages, but in her female and naked form, was never seen as an inconsistency.

## Conclusion

The present chapter dealt with changes in religious beliefs and practices following conversion to a Hindu reformist movement. The movement is read as an attempt to counteract witchcraft, against which local spirits and shamans had proven powerless, while the British ban on witch-hunting had left people without traditional means against it. The Mundas who converted to the movement attempted, on the one hand, to break with their ritual past by neglecting local spirits and sacred spaces, and on the other hand, to fill the vacuum with exogenous elements from different religious traditions. By analysing those changes, the chapter also argues for and provides ethnographic evidence of a process of 'masculinisation' of religion and the parallel association of female spirits with witchcraft.

Ultimately, however, the feminine energy is needed and not even the devotees can neglect harvest rituals. Mother Rice must 'enter the house' of the devotees to bring prosperity. Hence the need to counteract the female power either by marrying the goddess or by making her into a British man, as in the case of Pauri Devi.

Besides religious changes, conversion to the movement also led to social discrimination among agnates and the birth of a new caste. This will be the subject of chapter Seven, while chapter Eight will deal with the transformations in the kinship system, marital practices and social organisation of the devotees.

However, many of those who hurriedly converted to the *dharom* in an effort to seek temporary relief from the adverse conditions prevalent at that time, started reverting to the old faith when they realised the uselessness of conversion and when the restraints of the movement became unbearable. This will be investigated by Chapter Nine.

## **Chapter Seven:**

### **The devotees and the birth of a new caste**

#### **Introduction**

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide ethnographic details of a case of Sanskritisation, by investigating the reasons, dynamics and patterns of caste discrimination among 'brothers'.

First introduced by Srinivas (1966), the term Sankritisation refers to the process by which low caste groups imitate and adopt moral values and codes of behaviour of high castes to raise their social status. In the case under study, the Sanskritisation process can be read as a classic example of transformation of a 'tribe' into a 'caste'. The relation between tribe and caste constitutes a hotly debated (as well as an old-fashioned) issue in Indian anthropology. In a nutshell, colonial ethnographers and administrators first, and the fathers of the Indian Constitution later, have been accused of having 'essentialised' originally flexible and fluid social compositions (Deliege 1985; Cohn 1987). There appears to be a consensus among Indologists about the fictitious nature of the dichotomy and the existence of a continuum along which groups can be located according to their specific caste or tribal features (Ghurye 1943; Bailey 1960; Mandelbaum 1970).

The issue of whether Sanskritisation leads to a transformation of a tribe into a caste is avoided in order not being trapped into matters of pure definitions. Instead, the analysis focuses on people's own definitions and explanations of directions and mechanisms for change.

Social transformation is locally explained in terms of modernity versus backwardness. The forest becomes a source of shame rather than a source of power while 'the plains' become

a space of civilisation. The role played by women in this process is fundamental. Indeed, the female population is dichotomised into 'women from the forest', wild and backward (unsanskritised) and 'women from the plains', tamed and 'civilised' (sanskritised). As a matter of fact, women are the repositories of most rules and codes of behaviour that allow a household to claim a higher social status. Conversely, by disregarding such rules, women also have the power to deny their husbands' claims. When this happens, women are depicted as witches. Witchcraft accusations then become an attempt by the sanskritised male population to control the female power.

Previous chapters have shown how conversion led to a masculinisation of religion synchronous with a feminisation of witchcraft and ancestral practices. The association of 'low caste' women with witchcraft is common throughout all South Asia (Fuller 1992: 237). Accordingly, in the case under study, non-convert women are seen as poisonous witches and their households as polluting. Converts have therefore interrupted rice-beer (*dyang*) and women exchanges with them. In so doing, they have broken all bonds of kinship. Hence the development of Ho and Mundari sections within the same clans, or, in other words, the birth of a new caste, the Mundari caste.

### **The birth of a new caste**

#### **Mundaris, a classic example of Sanskritisation:**

The 'Ho-Munda' people of Porahat recognise each other as 'the same kind of people' (*mied jati hoko*) although they differ slightly in dialect and custom. However, those who migrated from the Hinduised northeastern plains underwent a process of Sanskritisation that transformed such differences in dialect and custom into caste boundaries.

Their forefathers migrated from the ex-princely state of Kharsawan, where they had already been subject to a strong Hindu influence. Moreover, they consider Tamar, in Ranchi district, to be their original homeland: Tamar has been a well-known centre of Vaishnavism since Chaitanya times, famous for having been frequently visited by mendicants working as channels of communication between devotional Hinduism and the Mundas. Somehow, then, they were particularly prompt to adopt Hindu reformist practices. To differentiate themselves from the 'non-Sanskritised', they called themselves 'Mundaris'.

Although the *dharom* is open to all Hos-Mundas indiscriminately, and a new encompassing category, the 'devotees' (*dharom-hoko*, lit: 'people of the *dharom*') has been developed, it is only Mundaris who embraced the *dharom* overwhelmingly, while the majority of Hos retained their ancestral practices. Indeed, people talk about the 'rules of the *dharom*' as the 'rules of the Mundari *samaj*'. For instance, Ho women devotees welcome guests in their houses à la Mundari, and not à la Ho. That is to say, they wash their guests' feet and anoint them with oil instead of offering a pot of water to their guests to wash themselves, as Hos would. This is read as a mark of Mundari-ness, yet in a Ho household.

The *dharom* is indeed associated with the Mundari caste. At the same time, however, there is no real overlap between the two, as not all Mundaris converted and, conversely, some Hos did convert. Thus, for issues of clarity, I am henceforth defining all members of the *dharom* as 'devotees', regardless of their being Mundaris or Hos. After all, this is the way villagers talk about members of the *dharom*.

By adopting Brahmanical codes of conduct, the devotees see themselves in a superior position in relation to the polluting non-devotees, in terms of status, power, and wealth. As devotees feel particularly vulnerable to sorcery, or to 'the impurity of the inferior' (Dumont 1980:49), they have interrupted any kind of food and women exchange with them. In

particular, Mundari devotees see non-devotees as transforming into Hos, i.e., into members of a different and lower caste. Hence the development of Ho and Mundari sections within the same clans.

## **The religious and caste divide**

### **Wilderness' and the criteria for social status**

Hos and Mundaris constitute two separate endogamic and hierarchically related social groups. Nonetheless, they share common ancestors and this fact is uncontested.

Mundaris talk of a degeneration of the Hos, who have an allegedly Mundari 'origin' but later adopted the behaviour of the 'forest 'people':

*'Everybody was Mundari, but then some among us could not be bothered to call Brahmans and barbers anymore, nor to look for 'proper women', as this would have meant many days of walking through the forest to reach the plains. They are lazy and don't think/care, so they became Hos' (Rasai Mundari, 05/09/1999).*

Hos' carelessness and laziness are held responsible for their distancing from an idealised past. Similarly, Pocock stated that: 'changes are not seen as innovations but as the recognition of an ideal which has been there all the time. Thus we read about castes that have 'changed' their status, but what is subjectively recorded is not a change, rather it is regarded as a reversion to a former status, said to have been lost to sight for generations' (1973: 59).

On other occasions, however, Mundaris appeared fully aware of the inconsistency and contradictions inherent in their reconstruction of the past, though references to it were



always scanty. Not only are they ritually and symbolically rejecting all 'relics of the past', as the next chapter investigates, but they are also undergoing a process of 'social forgetting' about it. Although people would prefer to simply avoid the issue, on some rare occasions they would admit that:

*'We were all forest people at the beginning, my forefathers and myself, too. I used to wear only a piece of cloth [botoi] and eat food cooked without oil or chillies. We were backward, primitive, wild. If you ask around about forest people, they will get ashamed.'*<sup>147</sup>

People would every now and then talk about their fathers' 'uncivilised' dress, food habits, and lack of modern education. I often heard people emphasise the fact that because their forefathers were naive and could not read and write, the Raja and the neighbouring Rautias fooled them. People would attribute their own 'civilising attempts' to their feelings of shame (*giu*) vis-à-vis the Rautias, the Raja, British officials, forest guards, merchants who come to their village to buy forest products, contractors and, most importantly, as we shall see later on, vis-à-vis their affines 'from the plains'.

By detaching themselves from the forest both as a mode of subsistence, as an identity marker, and as a spiritual source, it is my suggestion that the devotees developed a different world-view from 'the ideology of graveyards'. Still today, what devotees strive for is not the transformation of forest into new cultivable fields, but jobs in the public service, a higher status among their tribal and non-tribal colleagues, and not being depicted as forest people anymore. Local modes of production become associated with backwardness while the forest acquires a prevalent negative dimension.

In the 'land of the forest', different kinds of landscapes connote different kinds of people. Environmental boundaries correspond to cultural ones, with small differences in language, pronunciation, and customs. Hence, the Bir-hors are those people (*hōko*) who live in the deep forest (*bir*) and perform hunter-and-gathering activities; Buru-*hōko* are those who live in the secondary forest (*buru*) and practice slash-and-burn cultivation; and Hoko are those who live in permanent villages and practice settled cultivation. Devotees' perception of the relation between people and landscape is in evolutionary terms: they, the *dharom-hōko*, place themselves at

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<sup>147</sup> On that occasion, Rasai had accompanied me to a near-by village, in a densely forested area. I had heard a lot about the category 'forest people' but I had not yet realized it was a behavioural one rather than a caste denomination. As soon as I started asking villagers whether any 'forest people' were living there, Rasai required me to stop asking, as, he said, people would get offended and angry. Yet, he was the only one who was getting visibly embarrassed and ashamed by my question. While tracking back home, we both kept silent until he suddenly urged me to go and live in another house if I really disliked him that much. After a while we came across some rice-beer vendors. Surprisingly, he urged me to buy him a cup of rice-beer. As he is an absolutely teetotaler, I believed he was checking whether I would treat him as a 'forest man'. I knew the game he was playing, so I refused. He kept on theatrically pleading with me to buy him some beer, crying very loudly in front of the amused vendors that he was a very old and tired person, who had become extremely thirsty from trekking through the forest, and that he had done it only for me. I kept on refusing and eventually headed home alone. By not buying him the beer, I proved I did not consider him a 'forest man'. He then stopped feeling threatened by his 'shameful past' and eventually talked about his past as a 'forest man'.

the top of this 'continuum' while the Birhors are the most stigmatised<sup>148</sup>.

Ultimately, 'new' criteria for social status are linked to the 'new' concept of wilderness: disassociated from power, the 'land of the forest' is identified with marginality, ignorance, backwardness, and subordination, whereas 'the land of the plains' is equated with civilisation', a space for modernity, sophistication, and progress. To them, the Hindu reformist movement does represent a gateway to modernity', to the life-style of the cities and to the behaviours and attitudes of high caste Hindus.

To the devotees, to be 'modern' means to become a devotee and to adhere to values and behaviours of outsiders, the *dikus*. *Dikus* are 'those who read and write', 'those who speak Hindi', and 'those who live in cities and buildings'. They embody modernity. And to become modern, one has to marry 'proper' women from the plains, as we shall see.

#### Patterns of clan divide:

##### **A hair-cutting ceremony**

On January 1999, the Hair-cutting ceremony (Narta) of Virendra Soy's newborn baby was held - seven days after his birth. Agnates and affines took part in the ceremony. Among the affines were mainly members of the Gagrai clan. Some of them played a prominent part in the ceremony, though it was Hindu specialists who performed the 'main' rite. At the climax of the ceremony, a Hindu barber (*thakur*) cut the baby's hair in front of the house's entrance, while the infant was held by a low-caste midwife from the *Ganshi* caste (leather workers).

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<sup>148</sup> Whenever I emphasised the fact, for instance, that they share clan names and language with the Birhors, devotees would admit that they must have once been the 'same kind' of people, yet they would add that while the Birhors have *remained* backward, they have *progressed* instead.

Initially, the barber cut the hair of all men and the nails of all women outside the courtyard of the house, while the midwife washed the dirty clothes of the couple and the baby. She then bathed the infant, anointed him with turmeric oil and tied a thread around his waist. The ritual hair cutting then started. Finally, all men went to take a bath.

After coming back from the river, Ramai Gagrai, an affine, blessed the inside and the outside of the house with water taken from the river. The water taken by Ramai from the river was said to be Ganga water. With that same water, he also blessed the whole group of men<sup>149</sup>.

As the house was still an 'ancestral house', hence still inhabited by house spirits, the couple had been sleeping in a hut outside of it. Similarly, their food was prepared outside of the house. After Ramai's blessing, however, Virendra stepped inside the house, for the first time since he and his wife had moved out, and waited by the door for the midwife to ritually pass him the baby. That was the very first time Virendra had held the baby since his birth and that the latter had 'entered' the house.

The midwife dug a small hole beside the door to bury the baby's umbilical cord. The baby was then made to lie on a mat, through which an arrow had been put to keep malevolent spirits away, and his father put a thread of cotton on the baby's forehead, after having wet it with his saliva. It was then the women's turn to take a bath. We all washed our clothes, which we again wore after anointing our bodies with oil. Ramai blessed us, too, once we stepped inside the courtyard. Sunita, the mother, had brought a pot of water from the pond.

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<sup>149</sup> On the occasion of a death among the Gagrai, it was Virendra who went to their house and blessed it to end the pollution period of its members.

Plate 12: Newly-born ritually enters the house for the first time



Plate 13: Sunita brings water from the pond



With that water, she washed the father's feet and he gave her a new sari in return. She then drop some water from her wet

hair into the baby's mouth. The ceremony came thus to an end, with some rice-beer being offered to all present. While in the courtyard, only non-devotees drank. Yet in the evening, not only Virendra but Anika Gagrai and other convert men celebrated by drinking beer inside the house and then dancing until late before the eyes of the disapproving convert elders.

As the foregoing description shows, not only Hindu specialists but also agnates and affines played a key role at the ceremony. Among the affines, it was Ramai Gagrai, a converted Mundari, who concluded the period of birth-pollution by blessing people and spaces. Moreover, he was the first one to have had his hair cut and, to me, was referred to as the 'big man' (*marañ hō*) of the Mundari *samaj* by those waiting for their turn with the barber. I was exhorted to write this down in my field-book. On other occasions, too, I saw him accompanying Shiuli pujaris around the village, cooking for them during rituals but also instructing them, for instance, about correct ritual modalities.

Yet, in a less formal way, a woman, Suru Soy, Virendra's father's father's sister (classificatory) discretely instructed both Virendra and his wife, step by step, throughout the whole ritual sequence, about the correct practices. She would every now and then turn to me and proudly affirm: 'This is the way we Mundaris do it'. She is considered the most authoritative woman amongst the Soy and has the role of 'expert' on many ritual and non-ritual occasions.

Both the Soy woman and the Gagrai man were 'knowledgeable' persons in their respective fields: the woman took care that things were done 'the Mundari way', whereas Ramai was in

charge of the 'cleaning away' of dirt and pollution with water from the Ganga, *à la* Shiuli<sup>150</sup>.

Besides Ramai and his younger brother Anika, another Gagrai elder, Rupu Lal, was also present. Yet, he played no part in the ceremony and looked at it only from a distance. He is Ramai's father's younger brother's son and hence belongs to a different branch of the clan, a branch that never converted to the *dharom*. As a matter of fact, he is a real 'expert' on ancestral practices and a fierce Jharkhand activist, and so are his three sons. He was the first one to re-settle the neighbouring forest village, of which he is both village-head and priest. Still part of the Mundari *samaj*, he was, however, the last one to have his haircut by the barber and I was told that he was the third 'important man' from amongst the Gagrai, after Ramai and his brother Anika. The devotees dismiss his knowledge and authority.

Members of the third and last branch of the Gagrai clan, i.e., the descendants of Ramai's father's middle brother, were absent. As people told me, 'they are Hos', hence their exclusion. They are not considered as part of the Mundari *samaj* and have been 'left' both by their Gagrai 'brothers' and their Soy affines. At the death ceremony of one of its members, some Soys were present at the burial, yet none of them helped carry the grave stone nor anointed the dead body with oil: both actions would in fact have caused a loss of caste. In other words, Gagrai Hos are treated as untouchables.

As with the Gagrai clan, the Samad, Soy, and Hasda clans are divided into a Ho and a Mundari section. The way clans divide

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<sup>150</sup> This gender specialisation appears not to be a coincidence: among Shiulis, women do not play any ritual role, at least publicly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, God is a 'male thing' and religion has been masculinised. Yet, as we shall see in the next paragraphs, it is women who are responsible for the social status of their households. They are the repositories of Mundari-ness and it is their behaviour, which either substantiates higher rank claims or, conversely, is held responsible for a 'loss of caste'.

shows a strikingly similar pattern. Younger brothers have systematically converted to the *dharom*. Elder brothers either do not convert, or when they do, they soon revert back to ancestral practices. With time, senior and junior branches have developed, with different religious orientations, which ultimately has led to caste discrimination.

This pattern is by no means a novelty. Middleton (1963), for instance, showed how amongst the Lugbara of Uganda social splits are marked by the recognition of a man from a junior line as an independent lineage elder. As he noted, the elders' authority is only effective as long as the ancestors, for whose worship the elders are responsible, support them. The previous chapter showed how village elders in charge of the spiritual affairs of the village (Soy clan) lost their authority, hence the adoption of a system of belief coming from the 'outside'.

Nonetheless, the elders of most other clans kept adhering to ancestral practices. Or better, the data show a sort of frenetic mass conversion, followed however by a re-adoption of ancestral practices by the elders of most clans except the Soy and Gagrai. First the Samad and then the Pareya clans replaced the Soys as 'traditional' village priests.

In sum, by converting, members of junior lines appear to have challenged and opposed the elders' authority. The challenge is spiritual but it is also social, ultimately taking the form of caste discrimination. Again, Middleton (1963) showed how the seceding group must justify its departure from the ideal by placing responsibility on the senior line. It is the elders who must be held to have destroyed kinship.

Similarly, in the case under study, the junior branches who style themselves as Mundaris accuse the elder lineages, depicted today as Hos, of having 'degenerated' into a lower status through their improper behaviour. In so doing, they appear to have no other choice but to separate and to



disassociate from their practices in order to remain 'clean'. The following paragraphs outline some ethnographic instances of the coexistence of conflicting *Weltanschauungen* among same clan members.

### ***The Samad Clan***

The Samad clan has a Mundari and a Ho counterpart. They both originally came from Kutchai area yet from two different villages. The clan's members can not recall their common ancestor, yet they admit they are related and have the same 'big spirit' Jarika Pat. Each group recalls a forefather, called Kujri for the Mundari branch, and Jogta for the Hos. They have two separate graveyards and do not take part in each other's ceremonies.

At the time of conversion to the *dharom*, the Mundari branch of the clan consisted of two brothers, Bowe and Sunia. The elder brother (Bowe, late) never converted and instructed his three sons not to either. These are still very categorical about the need to follow the 'path of the ancestors'. They attribute most misfortunes afflicting devotees to the latter's neglect of forest spirits. Yet, they all married Mundari women and are considered 'in-between Hos and Mundaris', as we shall see in the following paragraphs. By contrast, Buwe's younger brother (Sunia, late) converted and all his descendants belong to the *dharom*. They constitute the Mundari branch of the Samad clan.

For what concerns Jogta's branch, there were five brothers at the time of conversion. With the exception of the younger one, they never converted and today they are Hos to all effects. Their ancestors too are talked about in Ho terms. The first one (Sangram, late) even acted as village priest when all Soys converted at the time of the entry of the *dharom*, and his descendants today act as 'traditional' shamans. They all have a house in the neighbouring forest village and hold lands and cattle communally. Moreover, they

have all married Ho women, with the only Mundari wife being outcasted by her own parents.

### ***The Hasda Clan***

The Hasda clan displays another such instance. When the *dharom* first arrived in the villages, of the four Hasda brothers only the eldest one (Basae, late) did not convert. Similarly, his descendants have not converted. Today, they constitute the Ho branch of the Hasda clan, or, as people say, the 'Hasda Hos'. The second brother (Choron, late) converted, and his son (Basae, late), and later his nephew, Udit, became Shiuli pujaris. Along the same lines, the third and fourth brothers (Muchi and Gulab, late) also converted. Muchi's son is today a pujari while Gulab's dynasty is extinct. The lineages of the second and third brothers constitute the so-called 'Hasda Mundaris'.

### ***The Gagrai Clan***

In the case of the Gagrai clan, it is not seniority but age that appears to have guided the dynamics of religious affiliation. At the time of the entry of the *dharom* in the village, of the three brothers only the third one (Chara) was still alive. With him, the second brother's son (Choron) and the first brother's son's three sons (Chara, Ramai and Mahati) were also there. In this case, it is not seniority among brothers, but age among male members of the clan, which counts. The three youngest male members all converted whereas the elder ones (Choron and Chara) did not and today their descendants are proud adherents of ancestral practices. The second brother's descendants have 'become Hos' and even he is talked about in Ho terms. Indeed, at the time of the entry of the *dharom*, he was a clan 'elder' and is today held responsible for the 'degeneration' of his branch.

## Reasons behind Sanskritisation

### *Strive for modernity*

Why did the younger brothers choose to challenge the elder's authority and break with their past in such a dramatic way? Further research is needed to provide an answer. However, evidence shows that the *dharom* represents to the devotees a way out of 'backwardness'. As a matter of fact, the Dirih-Bhanjara population shows a strikingly high number of retired civil servants, either teachers or forest guards. At the time of the first conversions, they were those 'younger brothers' who challenged their elders' authority. Their exposure to education and to the outside world made them look for jobs outside the forest and predisposed them to 'modernity'<sup>151</sup>.

Younger generations appear to have embraced the *dharom* as a modernising vehicle. Still today, devotees are the best educated, the most lured by life in the cities, and the most ashamed of their being or having once been 'forest people'. Their parents privilege modern education to learning skills connected to the forest. I never saw the children of 'my' converted family playing in the forest, handling bows and arrows, building bird traps, or hunting small animals, as children of non devotees would do on a daily basis.

Indeed, the children of my host family were explicitly prevented from learning these skills and encouraged to learn how to read and write instead. They would rarely leave their courtyards. I remember their father explaining to me how to blow 'bubbles' out of a resin from a certain tree. He then exhorted me not to teach it to his children, or, as he said, 'they will waste their time climbing up trees rather than doing their homework'.

The case of the Soy and Gagrai clans provides an instance of such strive for modernity. Because of its headman-ship, the Soy clan enjoyed a privileged position with the government, as the latter vested local authorities with new powers and used them as mediators. Moreover, the Soy and their affines, the Gagrai people, were offered employment opportunities in the civil service (as teachers and forest guards). This allowed for an additional source of income independent from seasonal variability and a means of income-lending activities. Hence the consolidation of power relations at the local level. Already established by its pioneering nature, the Soy clan thus added to its authority an external source of legitimacy. Moreover, by introducing the *dharom* into the village and acting as first pujaris, the Soys maintained their spiritual legitimacy at least for those people under their sphere of influence - their affinal clans.

### ***The rationality of the evil eye***

When asked directly, people would say they convert to the *dharom* 'because it is cheaper' (*labar gonon*, easy price). This explanation was given to me every time I enquired about reasons for conversion. People would affirm that ancestral practices require the killing of animals that they would rather keep alive and sell when in need. Some would complain about the greediness of local spirits, who are never satisfied with the number of animals offered to them and always ask for more. Eventually, they would add, 'people who worship them become as greedy as the spirits they worship'.

Ethnographic evidence shows that in times of crisis the economic explanation does indeed make sense, especially when

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<sup>151</sup> Rasai used to proudly recall the time when he attended school in Chaibasa run by the British. Since then, he has made *adivasi* education his personal mission. He spent seven years teaching in neighbouring villages though there were no official schools. He would gather people and teach them to read and write. Eventually, the British opened schools in the area. He then became an official teacher. He told me how smart his wife was to allow him to study at night by working in the fields herself and managing labourers without Rasai's help. Since then, Rasai never worked in the fields.

the number of goats required to appease local spirits becomes unaffordable. In these circumstances, goats are certainly more efficiently substituted by 12 rupee sweets. Indeed, there are many instances of households which are converting today because they cannot afford to heal their sick members in the 'traditional' way. When Shiuli healers do succeed in curing them, then conversion generally follows.

Yet on a day-to-day basis, the few fowls necessary to appease local spirits and the contributions required at agricultural festivals do not constitute such big expenses and have in fact never been mentioned as justifying conversion. Moreover, service rates of the main Shiuli gurus can indeed be rather high (Rs.300/500). Similarly, contributions to Shiuli festivals like Dasshara and Chait are also quite costly (Rs.100-200 per household). Moreover, the *dharom* prescribes a number of behavioural restrictions, fines to be paid, and ceremonies to be performed, which at the end of the day make conversion not so 'cheap and easy' as people would affirm.

In practice, people invariably postpone rites of passage because of the big expenses they imply: the 'Piercing of the ear', the 'Crossing jati' ceremony, the 'Putting of the stone slab', the 'Eating and drinking' at marriage and death times, marriage negotiations and the like. Yet, the performance of at least some of these rites is critical because of its propaedeutic nature: the 'Piercing of the ear' and the 'Putting of the stone' on the parents' graves must ideally be performed before their offspring's marriage ceremony is held and marriage negotiations are concluded. Similarly, children of Ho-Mundari couples cannot officially get married until their parents perform the 'crossing jati' ceremony. During my fieldwork, there has even been a case of 'crossing jati' ceremony performed by a couple married for more than thirty years who felt the need to 'regularise' their union, so that their children could eventually get married.

Yet, even in the everyday life, conversion does indeed represent a convenient choice. We have seen how misfortunes in general are attributed to witchcraft or the evil eye and how conversion represents a means to 'heal' and prevent daily witchcraft attacks. Following the line of the previous chapter, which linked conversion to witchcraft, I suggest that through conversion, people, especially the most well-off, underplay their wealth to avoid being the target of jealousy and envy and hence to deflect the evil eye from their own households.

As Fuller put it: 'jealousy and envy lie behind the evil eye as well [...] the harm is caused, often unconsciously, by the gaze of envious people. All kinds of trouble can be brought by the evil eye, and any display of good health, splendor, or success is likely to attract it' (1992:238). This might explain the stereotyped and ready-made answer to my enquiries about reasons for conversion, especially when given by rich villagers.

Whenever I enquired, for instance, about the amount of harvested and stored rice, it was the richest converted families who declared the smallest amounts. Even members of my host family, whose numerous fields enjoyed the best location, being near the forest and permanent water streams, and whose household head received a monthly pension of £1000 rupees, would publicly complain about their precarious financial situation. Indeed, their life-style remains rather modest and no luxury items were ever purchased, all capitalised wealth being secured in bank accounts<sup>152</sup>.

Besides Rasai, Sukhram Soy is also known for his wealth. He receives a monthly pension and acts as moneylender. Nonetheless, he is always complaining about his financial

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<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Gell (1986:132) recorded that the most well off people eventually spent their profits in the construction of houses, as these were perceived as a 'traditional' expenditure. The same tendency is to be found among the most well off Dirih villagers.

situation and is known as an avaricious man. His daughter-in-law once borrowed some money from me. I enquired with some of her relatives about the reason behind such an unprecedented request and emphasised the fact that among all families, hers was indeed the last one to need extra money. Well, of all that wealth, I was told, neither she nor her husband has ever seen a single rupee - as everything was held in bank accounts. And he too would underestimate his possessions. Both Sukram and Rasai, two amongst the richest men of the village, lived an austere life; both slept in a hut outside their houses even during the freezing wintertime and would save their pensions for 'for their descendants', as they say. And both are fervent devotees.

By contrast, among non-devotees, the ideal of consumption relates to public feasting. Resources are saved for eating and drinking, for festivals and ceremonies - conceptualised as the household's biggest expenses. As Gell so nicely put it, among the Muria in Bastar 'the stereotype of tribal innocence and hedonism, the "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die" attitude has a basis in fact. The Muria really do eat, drink, and enjoy themselves to a far greater degree than Indian peasants are commonly described as doing' (1986: 117). This attitude is precisely what the devotees disapprove of and despise. They read it as the real cause for backwardness and 'foulness'. They would repeatedly comment that non-devotees lack discipline, austerity, and a future-planning attitude. For instance, they would point out that, by consuming all harvested rice either in food or beer, non-devotees are generally left with nothing to pay labourers in advance with. Hence, the following year, some of their fields would necessarily have to be left uncultivated.

### **Women as agents of Sanskritisation**

The role played by women in the process of Sanskritisation has been and still is fundamental. When talking about the past, old Mundari women would casually admit that 'once we were all

Ho-Mundas'. Sometime in the past, however, some amongst them 'changed into Mundari to make their caste bigger' (*jati marañtanmente*). I remember my initial perplexity with Mundari women plainly talking about their past in 'Ho terms', the more so as their men were always very careful to give a different image of themselves or to simply avoid the issue. I then realised that not only was it that the women 'had nothing to lose' from such narratives, in fact they were in the position to 'gain' in terms of social status. As I was soon to understand, those women were the 'producers' of such social change.

Women are used as markers of boundaries and repositories of tradition, as much of the gender literature suggests (see for example Douglas 1966; Yalman 1963; Ortner 1981; Whitehead 1981; Bennett 1983; Caplan 1987). As a matter of fact, Mundaris are those people 'whose women do not drink alcohol', 'whose women are not buried in their husbands' graveyards', 'whose women veil themselves', 'whose women are bought in rupees instead of cattle at marriage', 'whose women take bath before and after cooking', 'whose women come from the plains' and so on. In everyday talks, particular emphasis is given to the fact that Mundari women 'wear the bracelet' (*sakomtanako*).

This is another way of saying that their marriage ceremony has been officiated by a Brahman<sup>153</sup>. The exact opposite is true for Ho women, who drink alcohol, do not veil themselves, do not take bath before and after cooking, but most importantly, do not wear the bracelet.

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<sup>153</sup> In the groom's house, the husband holds a silver bracelet anointed in turmeric paste on the bride's forehead for three times. Thereafter, he puts it on the bride's left hand, while she keeps her left eye closed with her right hand. At the time of her husband's death, that bracelet will be cut by the widow while keeping her right eye closed this time. Babb (1975) talks about a form of marriage common in Chattisgarh known as 'putting on the bangle', which, he says, 'is used for the remarriage of widows and divorced women.' In the case under study, however, this is not the case: the bracelet is used for regular marriages, and only for those, as remarriages are prohibited and would never be officiated by Brahmans. Yet, this kind of marriage, common among lower castes in Chattisgarh, might have acquired with the time a 'low caste' connotation and have lost its 'remarriage' specificity.



Sanskritisation is generally said to 'initiate or deepen female subordination and is inherently counterproductive for women' (Berreman 1993:370). Similarly, women are often portrayed as passive victims of male-dominated ideologies (see for instance Goody and Tambiah 1973). More recently, however, the multidimensionality of women's lives has been emphasised, by analyzing individual responses and roles played in the domestic domains to the structure of gender inequality (see for instance Papanek 1982; Dube 1986; Moore 1988). My analysis follows the same line. Mundari women appear to be aware and proud of their sanskritising role.

The *dharom* is intrinsically linked to the women from the northeastern plains and the set of rules they contributed to introduce in the village. Mundaris' genealogies show a relevant number of marriages with local women in the first generations, followed by an increasing number of unions with women from 'the plains', from about the time the *dharom* entered the village. As I was once told by an old Ho woman, it was 'people from Segoe, Kassae and Nanita villages', i.e., in-marrying women from Kutchai block in Kharsawan, who introduced the rules by which Mundaris substantiate their claims for a higher rank. She then added:

*'Dadkti's (in-marrying woman from Kutchai) mother used to come to Dirih and tell us that they belonged to a bigger caste because they followed different rules: they used Brahmans and bought women with money and not with cattle, as we do here'.*

Today, people simply conceptualise it by saying that Mundaris marry women from 'the land of the plains' whereas Hos marry women from 'the land of the forest'. In this case, 'the plains' correspond to the northeastern part of the district, from where their forefathers came from. The ex-princely states

of Kharsawan and Seraikella are located there. They have a Brahman ratio of more than 70% of the total population. Their impact on local tribal population is thus self-evident. Besides, there have also been marriages with old affines from Tamar in Ranchi district, also a highly Hinduised area.

Although it is ultimately a matter of speculative history to say whether these rules had been introduced by the *dharom* first or by the women 'from the plains', it however appears that both acted in synergy and contributed to the crystallisation of social and cultural boundaries to a degree which is not even found in 'the plains'. Such crystallisation of Ho-Munda boundaries appears to be a purely local phenomenon, as even in Seraikella and Kharsawan, intermarriages between Hos and Mundas do not imply penalties. As people say, Hos and Mundas still 'dance' (*gati*, to dance, to be intimate) together there.

Devotees look for their offspring's brides from the north-east in an effort to control the choice of the bride. Similarly, they also attempt to restrict female sexuality by restricting the bride's behaviour after marriage. Among the other restrictions, devotees penalise women's 'divorce', especially when children are born out of the union, as well as levirate and widow remarriage.

Women 'from the plains' are conceptualised as 'civilised' as they grew up in an environment imbued with Brahmanical values. As such, they have embodied rules and norms of behaviour, which assimilate them to high-caste women. And it is precisely this behaviour that substantiates and makes their husbands' claims possible. Mundari women have their movement restricted. The architecture of their houses shows an internal courtyard, which reminds one of *purdah* quarters. Mundari houses and courtyards are protected by gates so thick they impede indiscreet glimpses from passers-by. These contrast with the gates of non-devotees, which are much

flimsier and shabbier. Thick gates also work as a protection against the 'evil eye', of which devotees are extremely scared. Mundari women are not allowed to work in the fields and they leave their house only to take a bath and wash clothes or dishes (in case they have no servants). They go to the neighbouring market, but only in the company of other women and only for a couple of hours. Yet never did I see them heading to more distant market places as Ho women habitually do. Most of the Mundari women said the market was the only place they had been outside their husband's village. Once in the market, I never saw them consuming food or drinks. They would generally buy some personal effects and head back home. They would rarely be in charge of the shopping: the men of the house would take care of it.

Among women devotees, the gathering and selling of forest products and especially of rice-beer is prohibited, even though (and precisely because) these activities represent their personal source of income and a mode of livelihood independent from male-dominated ones. In so doing, the economic autonomy of women is both practically and symbolically impinged upon. Moreover, female recreational activities like dancing and beer drinking, lounging at the local market or by friends' houses and the visiting of distant kin are also inhibited. Moreover, convert women (and women only) take a bath twice per day before cooking, even in wintertime at the freezing temperature of the early hours. Except for taking a bath and washing dishes or cloths - in case they have neither servants nor daughters - convert women spend most of their time within the gates of their courtyards.

On the other hand, women have the power to either support or boycott their husband's Sanskritising claims. When they do support their husbands' aspirations, women appear to be conscious and proud of their own role as custodians of caste rules. When they do not support their husbands' aspirations, the devotees would generally depict them as witches.

## **Dynamics of caste division and conversion: witches, rice-beer, and wilderness**

### **Purity vs. pollution: producer vs. poisoner**

Ideas of purity and pollution are commonly applied primarily 'to women, who must either deny their physical bodies or circumscribe their dangerous sexuality.' (Rosaldo 1974:31) When clan members are made into Hos, or polluters, their wives are made into witches, i.e., as the poisoners *par excellence*. And rice-beer, just like poison, becomes 'the most apposite weapon to place in female hands. It is closely associated with food, and it is the wife as producer who gives food to her husband; but coming from an outside source, it is also like an exchange object given in transactions. It is the destructive, impoverishing counterpart of nourishment and of wealth.' (Strathern 1995:184)

As soon as I had settled in the house of my Mundari and convert host, he solemnly required me not to eat or drink with the Hos. 'It does not go', he first said. He then added: 'they kill by poisoning'. During the first stages of my fieldwork, even entering a Ho house would cause concern to my Shiuli hosts, and once back home in the evening I would soon be questioned about my accepting food from them. I remember my impatience and anger at discovering that he could not resist following me and my research assistant all over the village to check whether we had entered Ho houses or not<sup>154</sup>.

Other villagers would often report my whereabouts to him and in some cases even 'rescue' me. One day I was having tea with

an old Ho woman in her courtyard when I was suddenly 'abducted' by one of my Mundari and Shiuli neighbours who was coming back from the market. On that afternoon, I had unknowingly been initiated into the realm of witchcraft. Indeed, I was soon to discover that the old woman I was having tea with was considered to be one of the most powerful witches of the village. Questioned about the reason of her rude behaviour, the woman who dragged me away simply remarked: 'because they are different' (*eta:mente*). I later learnt she meant that they belong to a different caste.

According to Mair (1969), conflicts of authority, which generally lead to clan division, are often fought out by means of accusations of witchcraft. Indeed, the refusal of intermarriages is explicated by depicting all Ho women as poisonous witches, and the refusal of commensality is talked about in terms of poisoned food.

It is a common element of many cultures that refusal of commensality creates distance and enmity just like the sharing of food creates relatedness (see for example Bloch 1999). And in the case under study, the idiom used to justify such refusal of food and beer sharing is precisely fear of poisoning. As Parry puts it: 'eating, then, is a dangerous pastime. It lays one open to malign influences and the risk of infection. There is also the threat of witchcraft, which is almost invariably expressed as the threat of 'being fed something' by one who bears ill-will.' (Parry 1985: 614). And again: 'The refusal to eat is a repudiation of kinship - outcasting being expressed above all in a withdrawal from commensality.' (Parry 1985: 614)

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<sup>154</sup> Whenever confronted, he would cunningly reply that he was in fact 'following our steps,' as spouses' parents do during the first stage of marriage negotiations, implying that my assistant and I were trying to have a romance. We would end the confrontation with a big laugh. Yet, he was very worried about my safety. Having many enemies in the village, and considering the fact that his parents, his wife and one son have allegedly been killed by witchcraft, it naturally followed that the next victim should have been myself. Moreover, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, I involuntarily transgressed most of Pauri Devi's rules. I was therefore in a very vulnerable position.

Commensality with Hos is especially avoided during ceremonies or inside Ho houses. I never witnessed a Mundari entering a non-convert Ho house. Even when some Mundaris accompanied me from house to house to introduce myself to the villagers, at the very beginning of my fieldwork, even Ho courtyards were avoided in most cases. The opposite however does happen: Hos normally eat food cooked by Mundari women, either inside Mundari houses or at lunchtime during the break from work in the rice-fields. It must however also be said that day-to-day village life does not offer many occasions for social interaction. Instead, it is during festivals that social networks become evident. At Ho ceremonies, Shiulis would be given *khanda*, i.e., raw rice (which does not transmit pollution) to be cooked by them on a separate fireplace; at the death of the Gagrai woman, all convert guests strategically left at lunch time; during the *Birsa mela* (festival held on occasion of Birsa Munda's anniversary), people ate their food in separate lines; at the time of Lala Soy's marriage, the Ho pujari of the *dharom*, his non-convert cousin brothers were not even invited. I must confess I never observed what happens at lunchtime in Ho fields cultivated by Mundari women<sup>155</sup>. I have been told however that the Mundari wage laborers would accept food. In a way, that 'does not count' as polluting. Yet, they would never drink rice-beer, not even in those extenuating circumstances.

The more commensality is refused, the more social distance and separation is created and *de facto* reinforced. Just like the sharing of food becomes an overcoming of the fear of poisoning, a 'proof of a commitment that is continually being bargained about in the process of establishing moral social links' (Bloch 1999: 147), the inverse is also true, with avoidance of commensality becoming a public statement of the break of such moral and social links.

Among non-devotees, it is especially the sharing of rice-beer that represents trust and creates relatedness. By contrast,

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<sup>155</sup> Mundari women working in Ho fields constitute a quite rare phenomenon indeed.

devotees address rice-beer as 'poison' and 'social evil'. Instead of creating relatedness and trustfulness, rice-beer represents fear and danger. 'Traditionally' the best vehicle for witchcraft, rice-beer has also become the best channel for pollution and ultimately for caste discrimination. Indeed, among the Mundari devotees, consumption of rice-beer leads to untouchability. Because of Virendra's growing drinking habits, his father threatened a hunger strike, to avoid losing their caste and being expelled by their *samaj*. In a sense then, just like the poisoning substance can lead to the physical death of the unfortunate victim of witchcraft, the act of drinking leads to the social death of its habitual consumers and their household members.

Douglas (1991) made a similar connection between witchcraft and pollution, or better, 'contagious disease'. She extended the analysis of witchcraft accusations to the case of persons carrying infections. Witches become disease carriers and the occult harm becomes the contagious illness. The previous chapter has already shown the role played by witch-hunting expeditions as an attempt to put a new and dramatic epidemic under control. Moreover, the link between Indian hot goddesses and epidemics appears to be a pan-Indian phenomenon. Yet the point I would like to make here is that Douglas' analytical association of witchcraft with polluting diseases is in line with my suggestion to see Ho witches as polluters whose contagious contact and even sight has to be avoided.

And again, Dumont too noticed how the transgression of a touch-taboo is liable to cause, to the tribal transgressor, health problems, but to the Hindu one, the fall in social status (Dumont 1980:49). According to him, then, the Hindu notion of impurity differs from the tribal notion of danger (1980:48). The two are not opposites, though. Indeed, we shall show how among the devotees, they go hand in hand. In the Brahmanical milieu, pollution implies danger. As Bennett (1983) clearly showed, the more the concern with Brahmanical

values, the more the concerns with the dangers of uncontrolled female sexuality, of which witchcraft accusations become both a remedy and a deterrent.

Mundas' fear of contact with evil powers has indeed already been suggested as a possible origin of their touch-taboo (S.C.Roy: 1984).<sup>156</sup> In a sense, purity and pollution rules aiming at social separation and leading to caste discrimination appear to be based upon and amplify an already-existing fear of witchcraft.

It then follows that commensality is avoided first and foremost because of the fear of poisoning rather than because of ritual pollution. Conversely, one could argue that the fear of witchcraft is just an idiom through which people make caste discrimination explicit. I believe I am in the position only to speculate about the question. What my data do however show is that, for instance, animal sacrifices are avoided not because of non-violent ideals, but because they are associated with forest spirits. Moreover, the same term 'forest spirits' (*bongaburu*) is used for ancestral practices as well as for witchcraft practices. As a consequence, the polluting nature of non-devotees appears to derive not from ritual practices *per se*, but because of their association with witchcraft. Ultimately, then, it appears that those rules aimed at social separation which are justified in a Hindu environment by criteria of ritual purity and pollution, in the case under study mainly derive from fear of the evil eye.

The same understanding is confirmed by the fact that even among the Hos the fear of witchcraft is very deep and present. Yet it is not conceptualised in the same terms. The criteria by which Hos and Mundaris refuse commensality appear to differ. For the former, all non-Hos might be potential poisoners. For the latter, only those who do not use Brahmans and hence whose social rank is lower than theirs represent danger. Hos refuse commensality with

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<sup>156</sup> S.C. Roy gives an evolutionist interpretation of such touch-taboo by suggesting that it originated among the 'animistic aboriginals,' and later 'may have been borrowed by the so-called Aryan Hindus' (1984:114). Needless to say, such statement remains unsubstantiated.



all non-Hos, irrespective of their caste. They have always been categorical in telling me that they would never accept food from nor eat together with other caste people, even in the case of members of Brahman castes. This is confirmed by much missionary and colonial ethnography (see for example Crawley 1927:193). They would emphasise *difference* rather than *hierarchy*. By contrast, Mundaris would never refuse commensality with Brahmins. They have a more hierarchical notion, by which they would for example say that because Gau people carry water to high-caste households, then they would accept food from them<sup>157</sup>. By contrast, they would never accept it from the Birhors as the latter are 'dirty' and have always been so 'since the beginning'. Finally, they would eat with Lohars (ironsmiths) because their women too 'wear the bracelet', i.e. they too use Brahmins for marriage.

In conclusion, the fear of poison (or difference) transforms into fear of ritual pollution (or inferiority).

### **'The poison of the beer'**

In Mauss' opinion, one cannot really talk of gift exchange in case of objects of consumption and common sharing (Mauss 1996:43). The reason relies on the fact that things exchanged have a sort of inherent power which forces gifts to be passed around and eventually returned. They are loaned out rather than alienated. Hence the reciprocity of the gift. The implication being that consumable goods cannot have such power as they are by definition alienated. In our case, then, one could not really talk about reciprocity in case of rice-beer exchanges.

It is however my suggestion that rice-beer is conceptualised as a gift and it implies reciprocity, notwithstanding its consumable nature. As a matter of fact, rice-beer 'contains the person' and precisely 'because of this participation of the person in the object [...] the gift creates an enduring bonds between individuals' (Parry 1986:457). As Mundas see it,

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<sup>157</sup> Indeed, Gau people are often employed by them as cooks at marriage celebrations.

rice-beer embodies the nature of the woman who prepares it<sup>158</sup>. A woman should not be angry (*kurkur*) while preparing it, otherwise the beer itself will not come out properly and could even be unhealthy. Conversely, rice-beer prepared by so-called witches is by definition poisonous, not only because they are suspected of having performed some 'magic' (*bongaburu*) on it, but also because of their own intrinsic nature. That is to say, their beer could be poisonous even if they do not mean it to be. The association is so strong that to talk about the quality of one's beer is another way of talking about the quality of the wife who prepared it. And conversely, beer prepared by Ho women is by definition polluted (from the Mundaris' perspective, of course)<sup>159</sup>.

The fact that the exchange of rice-beer is conceptualised as gift-exchange is also made evident by body language and everyday practices related to its purchasing. The typical gesture for expressing greetings, welcoming, and gratefulness is called '*johar*' and consists of the uplifting from the waist of stretched arms and hands united in a 'cup' to meet and touch those of the other person. Never is the gesture done unilaterally: the person standing in front always reciprocates. The movement is done slowly and with a soft 'shhh' pronounced. Every time rice-beer is served by the woman of the house to the other members or to friends and guests, '*johar*' is always done, be it inside the house, in the courtyard or in the fields. Hence, the sharing of beer has an intrinsic ritualised element even in everyday life. Even more

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<sup>158</sup> Similarly, rice-beer is conceptualised as containing some of the Munda essence. It works as a marker of identity. I clearly remember the first day I reached the village and immediately I was offered rice-beer: as people commented, only by drinking it could I hope to 'become one of them.' Non-Mundas are said to lack both knowledge and skills. The taste of their beer is absolutely different, they would say. And other caste people agree. Moreover, it is common knowledge that exclusively Munda spirits are offered rice-beer libations. Because the neighbouring Rautias too have started offering beer to their spirits, they are talked about as becoming *adivasis* - yet their attempts are mystified by the fact that they mistakenly prepare the beer without using boiled rice, but only roots and water. Finally, the association is also shown by the fact that the Jharkhand party is generally talked about as the party of the '*challa*,' an essential instrument in the preparation of rice-beer.

ritualised is the peculiar way by which joking relations are reflected by the pouring of rice-beer. Similarly, barter is sanctioned by the reciprocal 'johar'. Yet purchase is not. Never does 'johar' follow the buying or the receiving of payment. On the contrary, even when beer is purchased, customers invariably made 'johar' to the woman who is handing the beer over to them, and she reciprocates. Somehow, then, beer retains the value of a gift even when it is sold. It is not my purpose to argue about the gift or commodity nature of beer but to emphasise the fact that whenever it is exchanged, in whatever context, beer is conceptualised as a gift.

As Parry put it, talking about the Polynesian context, things which embody persons and which constitute the *sacra* of the family 'were exchanged as gifts between groups, and were used to conclude a peace treaty, for the mana inherent within them has the capacity to create a strong bond between people' (1986:464). In the case under study, rice-beer does indeed constitute the *sacra* of the family. We shall see how it is seen as a 'gift from God' and how its intrinsic nature contains some of the lineage 'essence'. Moreover, it is generally used also to conclude a pact between people, for instance between the two parties at the conclusion of marriage negotiations. But most importantly, rice-beer does 'create a strong bond between people'. Indeed a bond of kinship.

The category 'eating-drinking' (*jom-nu*) refers exclusively to the sharing of boiled rice (*mandi*) and rice-beer. Both constitute the most nourishing feeding and at the same time the best conductors of social identity. Indeed, they are channels of both positive and negative 'qualities'. On the negative side, it is common wisdom among South Asianists to consider food transactions as being governed by rules of purity and pollution precisely because of the propriety of certain kinds of food to transmit some of the 'quality' of the

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<sup>159</sup> For the quite common principle of transfer of qualities through participation (like physical touching or ingesting).

cooker. It is not only the drinking of Ho rice-beer in itself, but also the alleged consumption of it that transmits pollution. Sunita (Virendra's wife) does not wash the dishes of Ho guests because of their alleged drinking habits, regardless of the fact of whether beer was indeed consumed. If she mistakenly touches them, she has to take a bath.

Conversely, 'positive' qualities can also be transmitted, like 'fertility' and 'kind-ness'. Rice plays a similar role of social conductor. Properly cooked rice is one that has been over-boiled until it becomes sticky. This only is called *mandi*. Such rice constitutes the only 'real food', just like rice-beer is the only 'real drink'. Indeed, the same term also translates the action of 'eating rice', in the sense of having a proper meal, as opposed to the verb 'to eat' (*jom*) which is generally used for other kinds of food, or symbolically for the act of marrying ('to eat a wife', 'to eat the bride-price'). In other words, rice is the only food that 'truly nourishes'. Improperly cooked rice is similar to raw rice, called *chauli*. Non-husked rice is called *baba*. When people use the expression 'to eat and drink' to refer to a feast but also to the social category of agnates, what they refer to by definition is the eating of overboiled rice and the drinking of rice-beer. These only create relatedness. People belonging to the same household are defined as 'eating and drinking' as well as 'people of the rice pot' (*mandi-chaturenko*), with cooked rice defining the closest group of relatives. And conversely, the non-sharing of them is read as an attempt to cut blood relations. Although men can prepare rice, they would never prepare rice-beer.

Indeed, beer is a 'female' thing and its production is intimately associated with the woman of the house: to bring someone else's rice-beer into a house is absolutely inconceivable. The case is of course different for other kinds of alcohol. Women alone have the knowledge about its preparation and about the appropriate roots to be extracted from the forest to ferment the rice. Men

always admit their complete ignorance on the matter. To be able to make rice-beer is a sign of womanhood and femininity. It is normally prepared inside the kitchen. Only married women can prepare it (yet unmarried women observe and even help their mothers in the preparation). A married woman who does not prepare rice-beer is inconceivable. Even among devotees, who are (theoretically) teetotalers, it is a matter of pride to be married to a woman whose rice-beer is the most tasteful. The making, offering, and drinking of rice-beer is full of sexual implications. Joking relationships among family members are made manifest by the way rice-beer is offered around and shared. The woman will not offer rice-beer directly to those people with whom she cannot joke.

Moreover, rice-beer is related to social reproduction also mythologically: the Munda myth of origin does identify rice-beer as the primeval creator of the (Munda) mankind, i.e., the primeval source of relatedness. Soon after creation, the first two human beings were opposite-sex siblings. God taught the girl how to prepare rice-beer, and after getting intoxicated, the two siblings had sexual relations and gave rise to mankind<sup>160</sup>.

At the mythological level, the primordial couple is consanguineous. Rice-beer makes them into affines and allows for reproduction. Distancing, through intoxication, was necessary to give rise to humanity. No sense of guilt appears to be implied. In everyday life, too, the ideal couple is a consanguineous one, with the wife becoming an agnate with the passing of time. And similarly, it is rice-beer which creates both relatedness and foreign-ness - not the occasional common drinking but the constant sharing of it, either daily or at particular festive occasions - by respectively making in-

marrying strangers into wives and out-marrying sisters into strangers<sup>161</sup>.

This life-long process starts at marriage. By marrying, a man is said 'to eat the woman' (*era-jom*), hence to incorporate and make her into one of them. As if, by being 'eaten', she is slowly 'digested' by her husband throughout their life together. Women must prepare rice-beer, and a good one, too, to contribute to the social reproduction of the lineage. The more in-marrying women demonstrate their 'good' intentions by not poisoning through rice-beer the more they are incorporated into the group. As Bloch (1999) also suggested 'the better a food is a conductor that creates bodily closeness, the better it is as a medium of poison'. The process completes at death, with the inclusion of her remains into the husband's graveyard. The graveyard symbolically becomes the most 'incestuous' place, i.e., the place where affines are made into agnates. A place that also belongs to the transcendental dimension, where the primordial (and consanguineous) couple of the myth is realised.

The same myth also shows how beer (and the knowledge of how to produce it) is conceptualised as a 'gift from God'. In the everyday life, it is seen as a sanctified substance. Indeed, in contexts of worship, both beer and the meat of sacrificed

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<sup>160</sup> According to the Christian reading, mankind then derives from a primordial incest, the 'original sin' derived from the consumption of rice-beer. Hence the interpretation of rice-beer as a social evil. Devotees appear to buy this interpretation. By contrast, non-devotees emphasise the fact that it was God himself who taught the girl how to make the beer, and that, they would add, removed the *dinki* (a long wooden instrument worked by the foot for husking rice) from its position, which was dividing the two siblings while sleeping. In other words, the origin of mankind does not derive from a sin, and rice-beer does not play an evil role; in contrast, its positive values for creation and for fertility are emphasised by the myth.

<sup>161</sup> Moreover, beer diminishes both distance and hierarchy. Whereas Ho-Mundas would never share boiled rice with other caste members, or would do so only by being spatially separated, the consumption of rice-beer is instead free from such constrictions. In a sense, then, the former reflects and re-establishes hierarchical relations; the latter removes hierarchy. Groups of people drinking beer together yet belonging to different castes was a common scene, especially during religious festivals, whereas the eating of boiled rice would always break the group into smaller parts either eating at different times or in different corners of the house or courtyard.

animals are talked about as *prasada*. The latter has been described as symbolising the 'human internalisation of divine qualities' (Fuller 1992:74). Without pushing the argument too far, it appears legitimate to understand the drinking of rice-beer outside the worship context as an 'internalisation' of another kind of quality, that of the agnatic group. God is normally talked about simply as the 'old man' (*haram hō* or *ham hō*), i.e., as the primordial ancestor, the progenitor of the Munda humanity, with human rather than divine attributes. Furthermore, ancestors too are defined as 'the old ones'. In a sense, then, a gift from God is a gift from the agnates, the lineage ancestors. And we have already seen how the 'agnate' category does refer both to a small group of household members or to the wider ones like in the extreme case of the entire Munda group. What is important is the 'common substance', which assimilates all agnates. And it is precisely this substance, this quality, which appears to be transmitted by the beer.

More in general, rice-beer exchanges produce essential bonds between people. In the relation between affines, the reciprocal exchange of boiled rice but especially of rice-beer between the spouses' families plays a fundamental role in the transformation of in-laws into kin. When they go on formal visit, their 'eating and drinking' with members of the localised lineage makes affinity blur with consanguinity. The sharing of such nourishment makes the affines' temporarily 'belonging' to the agnatic group visible: they are made into the same 'kind' of people, as the 'eating and drinking' is by definition made by 'people sharing the same rice-pot', i.e., householders. Whenever people talked about Mundari brides 'having become' Hos, the usual comment would refer to the fact that the bride's parents would not drink her rice-beer. Beer-sharing between husband and wife makes her more and more into an agnate; beer-exchanges between in-laws make them more and more into kin; and incidentally, beer-exchanges contributed to the transformation of the resident anthropologist from a *diku*

into a 'white girl' (*pundi mai*) and eventually into a younger sister (*misī kui*).

À la Mauss, with rice-beer there is not only the obligation to give and to receive but also the one to reciprocate. In other words, such gifts do not rate as *dana*, or pure gift, i.e., as a 'voluntary and disinterested donation made without ostentation or expectation of any kind of [...] return.' (Parry 1989: 66) In contrast, precisely because of the expectations of reciprocity, one could maybe talk of a loaned rather than an alienated object. In the case of ceremonies, it is a matter of 'total service', i.e., of clans or other social groups exchanging (yet not in an antagonistic manner, or at least not overtly). The same principle works at an individual level, too. What is emphasised is not so much the return of the same object, indeed an impossibility due to its consumable nature, but the reciprocity of it. I remember being told that I could really experience Maghe Parob only by having my own beer at home, ready to reciprocate beer invitations. On other occasions too, it was made clear that my being invited for a beer without having some to reciprocate was not the 'right thing' to do: while taking my leave from the people who had invited me for a drink, I would normally be reminded that I was obliged to reciprocate and I would often be the object of jokes about my inability to make it to justify the unilaterality of such exchanges<sup>162</sup>. Similarly, in his attempts to keep me at a distance from the 'poisonous drink', Rasai had instructed me about the only acceptable way to refuse an invitation, i.e., by saying that in my house I did not have beer ready to reciprocate. However, I soon learnt how to reciprocate their offerings even without beer: I would give them some rupees to be used to buy it at the market. Never was that money conceptualised as a payment for the beer given

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<sup>162</sup> Notwithstanding my incessant requests to be taught how to prepare rice-beer, this only happened after my boyfriend had come for a visit - indeed another sign of its implications for fertility and sexuality. In the following couple of days, those same people would repeatedly ask me whether I had finally prepared the beer and jokingly encouraged me to run back home and prepare it as they were indeed coming on a visit!



to me. That money was meant to buy the beer I had not prepared.

Along the same lines, a request for rice-beer is always followed by an offering of it and it generally reflects an intention to 'relate'. Such requests should never be refused, not even outside village boundaries. Indeed, never was a request for beer left unreciprocated for this would be read as an intention to break off relations. I remember when someone whom I barely knew asked me to treat him with beer. Surprised and irritated by the fact that I had been asked for money, I somewhat rudely refused. My friends then intervened and convinced me to accept his request. To my surprise, after the first cup, the man proudly asked the seller to refill my cup, though I had not solicited it, and eventually paid for it. He then stood up and silently went away. By that reciprocal drinking, he had shown to his friends at the market place that he and I were somehow related. More in general, whenever people wanted to drink in my company, I was always asked to pay first, but then it would be a point of honour for them to pay back.

Rice-beer is associated with women. Both women-exchanges and beer-exchanges allow for social reproduction as they perpetuate and strengthen affinal relations. In a sense, they reflect a 'concern with the relationship between a cycle of short-term exchange [i.e., the one of beer] which is the legitimate domain of the individual [...] activity, and a cycle of long-term exchanges [the one of women] concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order' (Parry 1989: 2).

Yet, as we have seen above, Mundaris have stopped such exchanges. Caste-wise boundaries between Hos and Mundaris are made manifest and clear-cut not only by the refusal to share food but also by the refusal to exchange women. The coincidence between food sharing and marriage, or sex, has long been underlined also with regards to Indian societies. Similarly, in the case under study,

we have already seen how the expression 'eating-drinking translates both food sharing activities and 'brotherhood', with commensality both reflecting and producing blood relations. Or, as Parry puts it, in Hindu culture, food is 'a source of life and a key symbol of nurture and kinship'. And conversely, 'the refusal to eat is a repudiation of kinship - outcasting being expressed above all in a withdrawal from commensality' (Parry 1985: 614).

It is, in Mauss' words, a clear rejection of 'the bond of alliance and commonality' (Mauss 1996: 13). Similarly, other kinds of 'ritual' exchanges have been interrupted. On the occasion of the death of a Ho Gagrai woman, my host family did not present their mourning affines with the customary gift of rice. They explained it by saying that the death happened on Thursday, the Shiuli's fasting day, hence the prohibition of giving. What happened the day after is particularly emblematic: contributions were given in money, not in rice, and by an unmarried man who had collected them from each household and then given them to the mourning woman. We have seen how unmarried people are not expected to follow social or religious rules. Hence, the unmarried status of the mediator clearly shows that such gift-giving did in fact represent the breaking of a rule proscribing gift exchanges with non-devotees. The same conclusion could be drawn by considering the fact that such giving was not performed by each household individually, but by a person who represented them all, a clear statement about the non-reciprocity and unilaterality of such prestation.

Among the Mundas, both rice and women constitute the 'supreme gifts'. It is in-marrying women that matter most, as they are an exogenous element that must be incorporated into the local lineage. They represent a constant threat to the 'purity' of the clan: 'incoming women are intruders, their links with other groups creating points of vulnerability. Here men are threatened not by an absence of strength but by positive malevolence. Women are credited with powers, the ability to

pollute and to poison, regarded (by the victim) as deliberately subversive' (Strathern 1995:183). When a Mundari man gets married to a Ho girl, the bride might transform into Mundari throughout a 'crossing caste' purifying ceremony. Mundari people would comment that in so doing, 'Ho women increase their status' (*Ho kuiko aulire jati rakaboa*). Before the ceremony is performed, Ho brides are not allowed to cook and are given water rice (*da: mandi*) by their mother-in-law. In so doing, Mundaris de facto create social discrimination and make it explicit. By 'accepting' Ho women only through a purifying ritual, Mundaris impose their higher status vis-à-vis the Hos.<sup>163</sup> Besides, the more the ceremony is performed and the more the boundary between the two groups is reproduced and made into caste discrimination.

In sum, it is my suggestion that Mundaris ultimately refuse any kind of gift-exchanges with Hos, and that they do so not only for the intrinsic polluting nature of the gifts, but especially for its symbolic value: by rejecting reciprocity, all kinship bonds are cut off.

### **Witchcraft, a female monopoly**

The previous chapters showed how conversion led to the masculinisation of religion while local spirits acquired a malevolent, feminine nature and became associated with witchcraft.

The Jharkhand adivasi population is unfortunately famous for the ill treatment of witches who are generally made to eat human excrement and/or murdered. Other Munda ethnographies show that although women are generally the victims of

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<sup>163</sup> The latter however see things differently and they too require a social remedy in order to 'counteract' that newly created gap. When the ceremony is performed, however, the girls' parents too have to pay a fine in order not to be considered as 'becoming Mundaris' like their daughter is. In so doing, they officially abandon her. This used to be the norm in case of marriages with other caste members, but not among Ho-Mundas. In sum, the ceremony appears to be used as a public statement of caste superiority by the Mundaris, and conversely as a means to resist such claims by the Hos.

witchcraft accusations, men too, though rarely, have been accused of such malevolence. In the village under study, however, it is exclusively women who are considered potential witches. There have been various attempts at explaining the association of witchcraft with women in African societies (Gluckman 1965: 220-25; Mayer 1970: 62; Bleek 1976) but only a few in relation to the South Asian sub-continent (Levine 1982; Gellner 1994; Skaria 1997; Mullick 2000a, 2000b) as far as I am aware.

Explanations of witchcraft accusations generally talk about female subversive attempts against established male authority. The lack of data on actual poisoning cases does not allow me to further explore this suggestion. However, it seems more appropriate to the case under study to look at the phenomenon from a different perspective. It is not the practices of witchcraft that act as female weapons against the male power, rather, it is witchcraft accusations that work as weapons in the hands of the male population. Other authors too underline the link between Munda witch-hunting and the process of establishing patriarchy while simultaneously negating the ritual, economic, and social power of women (Mullick 2000a; 2000b) <sup>164</sup>. The image of women as witches becomes 'an acknowledgement of their power and a reflection on the fundamental illegitimacy of that power' (Skaria 1997: 132). Similarly, with reference to the Bhils, it was noted how 'the tension between the power of women and its illegitimacy is most visible in the image of the [...] witch.' (Skaria 1997: 88). As 'women are felt to be in command of the essential goods of life', men 'have no other weapon that to resort to witchcraft accusations' (Bleek 1976:540).

Chapter Six showed how witch-hunting represented one crucial way of performing masculinity and controlling wilderness.

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<sup>164</sup> This author however considers the phenomenon of witchcraft to have been adopted by the Mundas from their Hindu neighbours. I am afraid such statement is unverifiable and the lack of historical data does not allow me to support such hypothesis. In fact, were we to consider the entry of the *dharom* in Dirih as the most pervasive contact of the villagers with the Hindu ideology, my data would then show the exact opposite, i.e. that witchcraft was already in place and the *dharom* represented a means out of it.

However, such control must have been impossible with the British ban on killing witches. Other ways had to be found. Hence the success of the conversion movement, the condemnation of female deities, the selection of 'civilised' women 'from the plains', the introduction of rules restricting women's autonomy and so on. By condemning women's ritual and non-ritual powers and by threatening witchcraft accusations, adherence to certain (male-oriented) rules of society could be attained. Witchcraft accusations then also appear to represent an attack on the existing status of women, both in the sphere of social and ritual authority and in that of land rights in particular, as an attempt to institute a different set of gender roles and norms.

I have no data to affirm an increase in the accusations of witches or a transgression of the ban imposed on witch-hunting expeditions. Indeed, the scarcity of sources makes any attempt to study witchcraft in colonial India rather difficult. Moreover, the available documents generally deal with witch-hunters rather than with suspected witches *per se*.<sup>165</sup> Whether there has been an increase in the practice or in the accusations is hard to judge. However, I am more concerned with the discourses about witchcraft rather than actual practices. Whatever the case, people appear not to perceive any increase in cases of sorcery.

What my data interestingly show is that all Ho non-convert women are indistinctly and stereotypically talked about as witches by the Mundaris. At the same time, only rarely are they pointed out individually. In a sense, then, the number of accusations have indeed increased, but also 'generalised'. It then appears today to be more a matter of discrimination and stigma rather than individual denunciations. Mundaris would not eat in Ho houses 'because their women poison the food'. By accusing Ho women of such malpractice, their

households too become polluting. Contact with them and their households is considered poisonous and hence avoided. What is feared is not so much - or not only - physical death but also the social one.

If all Ho women are stereotypically talked about as witches, it is anomalous women who are especially pointed out as poisonous, dangerous, and dirty. While Mundari non-convert women are the most anomalous and talked about in Ho terms, 'social equals, who are nonetheless doing a bit worse than oneself, are the people whose envious eye may cause harm' (Fuller 1992: 238; Pocock 1973: 28).

Generally, anomalous women are those whose power is considered illegitimate, whatever their caste affiliation. This is especially true in the case of Mundari non-convert women, but also for those who do not contribute to social life and reproduction, because they either failed to bear children or lived to mourn the death of their male kin (Rosaldo 1974: 32). As a matter of fact, the absence of male heirs is often attributed to a specific intention of the woman, who can induce abortion or use contraceptives. Never is the man considered responsible. And the power of a woman who does not bear children to control her sexuality is the most illegitimate. Be it unmarried sisters or childless women, their inverted motherhood is derived from their lack of contribution towards the social reproduction of the lineage. Men fear their independence, their hot nature, and their female energy. And it is probably not by chance that witches are generally characterised as 'energetic', assertive, loud, challenging and fearless women. In the particular case of widows, the Mundaris' notion is then similar to that of upper caste Hindus, by which widows are 'pariahs, evildoers, and poisoners, they are despised and feared' (Rosaldo 1974:33).

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<sup>165</sup> See for instance Mathur (1988:59-71) who reports a list of cases under the proceedings of the Foreign Department (1852-3) about punishments of

It is witches' economic power that is the most illegitimate: in such a patrilineal and patrilocal society, land belongs to the local lineage. Women can only possess moveable property, as they too move and shift loyalty from their father's lineage to the one of their husbands. Men and women alike eagerly defend this ideology and do not accept the application of Hindu law, which prescribes daughters' land inheritance - from which they are in fact exempted. Women's traditional rights to land consist either of a life interest, i.e., the right to manage land and its produce and the right to a share of the produce of the land. This is again of two types: maintenance right or the right to accumulate a part of the harvest for unmarried sisters (yet married sisters who divorce and come back have only maintenance rights).

What matters to agnates is the childless woman. And indeed, they are the ones suspected of aiming at murdering their husband in order to enjoy their husband's property. By accusing them of witchcraft and either ostracising them or driving them away, their lands will immediately pass into the hands of the husband's male agnates.

In Dirih, an old Ho woman was considered to be a witch and ostracised also by her own relatives. As she was childless, she had no other choice but to leave the village. This is at least the version of the villagers, according to whom, she eventually ran away in the forest and 'became' a Birhor. Needless to say, her husband's relatives inherited all her fields after his death. Similarly, unmarried sisters too are despised, as they generally inherit a share equal to that of their brothers at the time of their father's death.

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people who participated in witch-hunting expeditions.

Rasai's two younger brothers' wives provide another interesting instance as both have been depicted as witches<sup>166</sup>. Yet of the three brothers, Romeshwar is the only one who did not convert. His wife is held responsible for the death of her husband's parents, for the fact that her married son is still childless and for an illness that almost killed her husband some time before. People whispered she used to spend night and day in the forest instead of curing him. Romeshwar is said to be completely subjugated by his wife's power, which not only Rasai but many villagers fear to death. Again, she is an assertive and proud woman and her loud personality contrasts with her husband's introverted yet tenacious nature<sup>167</sup>.

Rasai's youngest brother's wife too had been pointed out to me as a witch. Even though less emphatically, Rasai once whispered she was the one who controlled all the money of the household, was intentionally not giving him heirs, and was held responsible for her husband's chronic sickness. Yet the two families still visit each other on a daily basis and eat together on many occasions.

In sum, it appears legitimate to affirm that anomalous women are likely to be accused of witchcraft unless they convert, with conversion representing a means to both prevent and counteract witchcraft accusations, as well as a means to raise the social status of the whole household.

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<sup>166</sup> Indeed, Rasai often speculated on the favourable consequences of having both his brothers without heirs: his own descendants would inherit all the plots of land of the lineage - unless his brother's wives brought their own kin in.

<sup>167</sup> The two always quarrelled until he eventually moved out of the house and the village and settled some twenty miles away in Sonua. He comes back every now and then to perform the agricultural rites for his household and to visit his son and his daughter-in-law of whom he is particularly fond. Whenever he comes back, he sleeps outside the house, under a shelter in the courtyard. His wife keeps on quarrelling with her daughter-in-law, too, and the couple lives separately from her, in a hut built near-by the house. Neither her husband nor the couple eats from her on a regular basis. Romeshwar is today building a brand new house for them. From the point of view of the villagers, Romeshwar is under the spell and control of his wife: he is said to have another wife in Sonua, yet he appears not to be able to get rid of this one.



## Conclusion

The chapter has provided ethnographic instances of a process of Sankritisation undergone by those Ho-Mundas who converted to the *dharom*. By adopting Brahmanical codes of conduct, the devotees see themselves in a superior position in relation to the polluting non-devotees while at the same time feel particularly vulnerable to sorcery, or to 'the impurity of the inferior' (Dumont 1980:49). For this reason, they have interrupted food, beer and women exchange with non-devotees. By breaking off all bonds of kinship, Mundari devotees see their non-devotee caste fellows as transforming into Hos, i.e., into members of a different and lower caste. Hence the development of Ho and Mundari sections within the same clans.

By sanskritising, not only do devotees aspire to a higher social status, but they also 'modernise'. To them, to be 'modern' means to socially and ritually differentiate themselves from the 'forest people'. Ultimately, criteria for social status are linked to concepts of civilisation versus wilderness: disassociated from power, the 'land of the forest' is identified instead with marginality, ignorance, backwardness and subordination. By contrast, 'the land of the plains' is equated with 'civilisation', a space for sophistication, progress and ultimately, modernity.

The following chapter will investigate the changes in the kinship system, social organisation and sacred landscape of those who sanskritise, while chapter Nine will deal with those Ho-Mundas who chose not to sanskritise and privilege the 'ideology of graveyards' to Brahmanical criteria for social status.

## **Chapter Eight:**

### **Changes in kinship, social organisation and sacred landscape**

#### **Introduction**

The present chapter investigates the dramatic changes undergone by the kinship system and the sacred landscape of the devotees. In so doing, it attempts to shed new insights on the dynamics and modalities of social change among groups living at the 'fringe' of the Hindu world.

First, the concept of clan and of 'agnate' is changing. Devotees are developing asymmetrical kinship systems with the possible implication of hierarchical relations between clans. Simultaneously, they have also introduced an alternative exogamic principle to the one based on clans, and ultimately, they are creating affinity among 'brothers'. This appears to constitute a strategy for the Shiuli *dharom* to perpetuate itself endogamously and maintain its 'purity'.

Second, religious affiliations have replaced primordial links. As Weber suggested, conversion movements have an in-built propensity to devalue kinship bonds as against the claims of religious affiliation. Accordingly, in the case under study, it is not clan but religious ties that count. In the same line, it is not the sharing of a common rice-pot during life, or the sharing of a common burial ground after death, that matters. What really matters is to share religious beliefs and practices and a common worship place. The sacred landscape is then conceived differently. Access to houses is based upon religious affiliation rather than bonds of kinship while graveyards are either abandoned or separated into a Ho and a Mundari section. In other words, graveyards and kitchens have stopped being the 'producers' of 'brotherness'; instead, they have become places for *separation*. In so doing,

they both reflect and perpetuate social fragmentation and discrimination among brothers.

## **Transformations in kinship and social organisation**

The kinship system of the devotees is undergoing dramatic changes. On the one hand, devotees are developing asymmetrical kinship systems with the possible implication of clans being hierarchically related rather than enjoying equal status, as they would do otherwise. On the other hand, devotees have introduced an alternative exogamic principle to the one based on clans, and ultimately, a different notion of brotherhood. In other words, affinity is created among agnates: by making previously 'brothers' marriageable, the category positively affects the pool of devotees' potential spouses. This is crucial if the Shiuli dharom is to perpetuate itself endogamously.

### **From symmetrical to asymmetrical kinship systems**

Previous chapters have shown the processual nature of women's clan membership. Women become agnates with time and by contributing to the social reproduction of their husband's clan. The process completes at death time, with the burial of the woman in her husband's graveyard. By contrast, in convert households, wives are not incorporated into their husband's clan nor made into agnates. When they die, they are buried in a separate graveyard for 'in-coming women'.<sup>168</sup>

Indeed, among the devotees, married sisters retain something of their natal clan even after marriage. As such, it is the relation between brothers and sisters, or better that between ego's father and ego's father's sister, which is undergoing a

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<sup>168</sup> This appears to contradict the Brahmanical ideology, which lays most stress on the transubstantiation of the wife at the time of marriage, such that she becomes the 'half-body' of her husband.

dramatic change: father's sister's daughters are considered agnates and of the same 'kind' of their mother even though they formally belong to their own father's clan. They are therefore unmarriageable.

I clearly remember people's reaction to my enquiries about marriages with one's FZD: devotees always replied that 'agnates' are unmarriageable kin and would show disgust at the mere thought of such unions. They would use the term 'sister' (*misi-kui*) for a FZD instead of the cross kin term *hatom-hon kui hon*. I remember Aris Soy asking me to look for a wife for him as he said he was growing old without a woman. When I suggested a girl from the Hasda clan in the village, he looked at me annoyed and explained that his grandfather's sister got married to the girl's grandfather. As such, the girl is the FZD of Aris' grandfather's, hence Aris' sister.

In contrast, non-devotees would allow marriages with FZDs. Indeed, their genealogies show many such marriages. To them, father's sisters do become 'guests' with marital life. Hence, FZDs belong to their own father's clan and become 'marriageable kin'.

As Chapter Four investigated, bilateral cross-cousin exchanges constitute the preferential marriage patterns among the Ho-Mundas, with no apparent preference for patrilateral or matrilateral side.<sup>169</sup> Clans enjoy equal status and women are exchanged on a symmetrical basis, with no permanent status distinction between the groom's people and the bride's people. By contrast, by forbidding marriage with one's FZD, devotees are developing a pattern of matrilateral marriages, which would theoretically lead to asymmetrical exchanges.<sup>170</sup> Although, at the clan level, marriages with a woman belonging

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169 The rule of bilateral cross-cousin marriage has been taken to represent at least South Dravidian kinship systems, with unilateral variants as derivatives of it by specialization (Trautmann 1981:236).

to ego's father's sister's clan – yet, belonging to different houses – is still very much in practice, the prohibition of FZD marriage may in the end encourage significant developments in terms of hierarchy between clans.

A similar trend was recorded by Kapadia among the Telugu Brahmins of Tamil Nadu, who favor marriage of a male ego with a MBD rather than FZD. She explained this preference by assuming a female rather than a male ego and observing that 'the choice of a groom from the girl's mother's side [...] was a choice that valorised relations with the matrilateral kin and strengthened the position and status of the girl's mother. A choice of groom from the young woman's father's side [...] was, similarly, seen as a choice that strengthened her father's authority.' (Kapila 1994: 855-856) In other words, marriages of a female ego with her MBS are seen as weakening the authority of the patrilineage. A similar trend among non-Brahmin castes was recorded all over south India (e.g., Rao 1993). Kapadia would explain the devaluation of traditional affinal links with a woman's matrilateral kin with the increased use of dowry instead of bridewealth and economic differentiation within endogamous caste groups. This explanation would probably apply to the devotees, whereby the extremely low rate of bride-price and the jewellery provided by the bride's parents at marriage appear to represent a shift towards dowry.

### **An alternative exogamic principle: the gotra category**

Devotees have been undergoing changes not only at the household level but also at the clan level. A new social category, the *gotra*, has been introduced *ex novo*, most probably by in-marrying women from 'the plains'. Previous chapters showed how women from 'the plains' work as vehicles for Hindu norms and codes of conduct. The *gotra* category is

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<sup>170</sup> But it need not, and in principle, marriage with one MBD can be between equal-status clans.

one such Hindu element, which appears to have been widely adopted not only by the devotees but by tribal people in general (Karve 1965: 115). The exogenous nature of the *gotra* is shown by the fact that *gotras*' names -peacock, lotus, snake, and turtle - remind the Hindu tradition. Further, their adoption is connected to Brahmans officiating marriage ceremonies. Finally, the same *gotras* are found among neighboring Hindu castes, like the Lohars and Goallas.

The *gotra* works as an alternative exogamic principle among the devotees. Indeed, its introduction appears to have weakened clan-based exogamic rules. My data shows that whenever conflicts between clan and *gotra* affiliations arose in the regulation of intermarriages, *gotra* affiliations eventually prevailed over clan ones. Intermarriages among 'brothers', which non-devotees would consider as incest, were in fact left unpunished by the devotees. As people say, 'they have different *gotra*, hence they can get married'. Although none of those marriages had actually been socially arranged, yet neither have fines been levied nor compensations been asked for.

One interpretation for the introduction of an alternative exogamic principle refers to its demographic implications, i.e., to the fact that the introduction of the *gotra* exogamy actually expands the available pool of potential spouses, and that this is crucial if the Shiuli dharom is to perpetuate itself endogamously.<sup>171</sup> *Gotras* crosscut clan affiliations and act as sub-clan as well as inter-clan segmentation, with members of a common clan being internally differentiated *gotra*-wise and members of different sub-clan segments sharing

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171 Although the fact that the *gotra* exogamy exists also where the dharom or similar small sectarian movements are not present appears not to support this thesis, it can however be safely affirmed that the prevalence of *gotra* over clan exogamy reflects the dominance of the Brahmanical ideology as it reflects the need to maintain the purity of the people.

common *gotras*.<sup>172</sup>

Whenever *gotra* exogamy prevails over clan exogamy, then the transformation of 'brothers' into 'guests' follows. Or, to put it differently, affinity is created among agnates, with members of 'brother' clans intermarrying as they have different *gotras*. By making previously unmarried 'brothers' marriageable, the category positively affects the pool of devotees' potential spouses. Though the opposite is also true, as 'guests' are made into 'brothers' whenever people belonging to different clans share the same *gotra*, my data however suggest that the former trend prevails over the latter. Indeed, I could record only one case of 'guest' clans becoming 'brothers' *gotra*-wise. This is the case of the Mundari Hasda and Gagrai clans. Their genealogies show intermarriages in the past. Yet today, because they have the same 'Nag' *gotra*, they recognise each other as 'brothers' and abhor the idea of intermarriages.

Non-devotees, however, see things differently: they punish unions among same clan members and assimilate clan endogamy to marriages between Adwa and Tiu people, i.e., between 'brothers'. A Ho from the Soy clan threatened with death the 'partner' of her sister, himself a member of the Soy clan, and the couple was eventually expelled from the village. While commenting upon that event, people would commonly refer to Jayram Baba, the Shiuli guru who first introduced the *dharom* in the village. He had married a woman from his own (Hembrom) clan and this looked like an aberration to them: 'how can one marry his own sister' they would add. Conversely, devotees would say that Jayram married a woman from a different *gotra*, so that there was no 'sin' in his marriage (*ka papikerae*).

*Gotras* then are in no way equated to clans. Clans and *gotras* appear to emphasize the two different spheres of descent and

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<sup>172</sup> See also Parry, when he affirms that the *gotra* is often conceived as a phatry or grouping of clans (1979:134).

alliance: where clans represent lines of descent and special links between people, spirits, and territories, *gotras* regulate intermarriages only. In a way, clans emphasize consanguinity whereas *gotras* are mainly concerned with affinal relations. My data thus differ from those ethnographies of northern India which assimilate the two. See for instance Mayer, who designed *gotras* as based on agnatic ties, putatively assumed from the patrilineal succession to a common clan name and a common clan goddess ((1960: 161), or Parry, where he affirms that: 'in some areas of northern India the clan is designated by the term got or gotra' (1979:134).

The main function of *gotra* affiliations consists in the regulation of intermarriages. In their simplest form, i.e., the so-called 'one *gotra* rule,' they imply *gotra* exogamy. It is officiating Brahmans who verify whether a marriage violates the *gotra* exogamic rule. In their everyday life, however, people would rarely mention their *gotra*. What really matters is their clan. I managed to learn about each villager's clan in a short time, whereas it took me a much longer time to learn about people's *gotras*. The latter appear not to affect the life of people in any way, except at marriage. Unlike clans, *gotras* lack any spiritual connotation, being neither worshipped nor considered as food taboo. I clearly remember Sunita, my brother's wife, collecting and eating lotus flowers while taking bath in the pond, unconcerned about the fact that the lotus was her *gotra*. Along the same lines, I have not been able to collect a single 'myth of origin' regarding *gotras*. People would simply say that they were born 'of' a particular *gotra*, and would see that 'attribution' as unchangeable. Unlike clan affiliations, *gotras* are something people do not construct or actively engage with during their lifetime. Given by birth, there is no particular ritual attached to them. Women change *gotra* during their marriage ceremony.

Whereas brotherhoods imply equal rank, *gotras* introduce hierarchical distinctions among 'brothers'. Clan members who



use *gotras* claim to belong to the 'bigger' section of their clan: for them, to have a *gotra* is a sign of higher status. Ho devotees generally have no *gotras*, as they only recently started to exchange women with 'the plains.' They are therefore transforming their sub-clan distinctions into *gotras*. Kariman Bandra's wife, a Ho devotee, once told me that she belonged to the *Jan-jom* (bone-eaters) Bandra clan. In another occasion, when I enquired about her *gotra*, she unconvincingly recalled *Jan-Jom* as being her *gotra*. Another instance is given by her husband's elder brother, Abhiram Bandra, a Ho pujari of the *dharom*. He even replaced the sub-clan prefix 'Bone-eaters' with 'Leaves-eaters' (*Ā-jom*). In so doing, he deliberately intervened in the designation of his sub-clan by transforming it from a carnivorous into a vegetarian one. The replacement of the original sub-clan designation with a 'vegetarian' one clearly shows the introduction of hierarchical distinctions among 'brothers.' In other words, the category reflects the breaking of clans into a higher and lower section, and the creation of social cleavages. At the same time, however, clans do not appear to be hierarchically related among themselves *gotra*-wise. Ultimately, *gotras* appear to reflect and simultaneously contribute to the development of caste distinctions among brothers.

**Diagram 9: Clan spirits and gotras**

Clan	Clan spirit				'Brother' clans	Gotra
Samad	Kanda Buru	Chutu Buru				none
Samad*				Jarika Pat	Dangil	Sara: Samad Kamal-lotus Madroya
Soy *	Kanda Buru		Gilwa Pat		Gilwa	Bahwa - beatle
Soy	Sekarya Pat		Gilwa Pat		Gilwa Kerai Gagrai	None
Bandra*			Gilwa Pat			Jan-jom Bandra
Gagrai *	Dumbra buru	Sargenya Pat		Jarika Pat	Kerai Hansda	Nag
Gagrai	Dumbra Buru	Sargenya Pat		Jarika Pat		none
Pareya				Jarika Pat		Tuti-arrow
Bankira*				Jarika Pat		Meyer-peacock
Hasda				Dada bonga	Gagrai	
Hasda *				Jarika Pat	Gagrai	Nag
Hembrom*				Jarika Pat		Pundi Diri
Hembrom	Shisse Charu					none
Bandya	Mada Buru				Gundwa	none
Jamuda	Desauli !!				Hangarya	None

*Clan names with the \* sign are those who converted to the Shiuli dharom.*

## **Changes in the sacred landscape**

For the devotees, religious affiliations have replaced primordial links and non-convert clan-fellows are considered a 'different kind of people'. It is not the sharing of a common rice-pot during life, or the sharing of a common burial ground after death, that matters. What really matters is to share common spiritual beliefs and practices and a common worship place.

Devotees have rejected the 'calling back' ceremony. In so doing, they have neglected the ritual 'path' which connects the house to the graveyard. The spirits of the dead are not 'called back in' the house anymore and Brahmans are called to guarantee for their departure from the livings. Accordingly, burial grounds have either been abandoned or they have been split into Ho different sections, caste-wise. Kitchens have stopped being the adobe of ancestors' souls and indeed the older ones need periodic purification – while access to non-convert clan fellows is firmly denied.

### **The house**

We have seen how among the non-devotees the house is an ambiguous place, which allows for the continuity between life and death, between affinity and descent. On the one hand, it is the site of anti-death, where descent is transformed into affinity and the social reproduction is symbolically and physically attained. On the other hand, however, the house is also the place of death, where the dead is called back and where the community of dead members of the household resides.

Among the devotees, such continuity is broken: Shiulis are ritually and materially 'cleaning' (*sappa*) their 'houses' from death, from the ancestors and from the past. The spirits of the dead are not ritually 'called back' in the house anymore. The kitchen ceases to be their dwelling place. Those spirits

that had been ritually 'called back' before the household's conversion to the *dharom* represent a permanent threat and are feared and neglected. Thus, the kitchen becomes the most vulnerable place of the house, in need of periodical and weekly blessings by the household's head as well as by the pujaris. In some extreme cases, kitchens have been abandoned or destroyed altogether, especially at the time of conversion, and substituted by fireplaces in different corners of the house. Rice bundles are not ritually introduced into it anymore, as they are stored in other parts of the house.

In everyday life, 'purity' criteria rather than kinship relations define who can enter and who is excluded from the kitchen. Among non-devotees, access to the kitchen is absolutely restricted to the household's (not even clan's) members. Not even priests are allowed inside. As I was repeatedly told, the 'house spirits' live in there, and nobody can see them except household members. By contrast, among the devotees, access to the kitchen reflects access to Shiuli *māths*: what really matters is religious affiliation rather than kinship relations.<sup>173</sup>

### **The graveyard**

Similarly to houses, graveyards too are undergoing drastic changes in the way they are conceptualised. In some cases, they still reflect social boundaries and their own boundaries have been 'revisited' and adjusted to the new social scenario. In other cases, however, graveyards have been abandoned altogether. In general, it appears that it is *māth's* boundaries that reflect or negotiate people's social affiliations. It is not the past, i.e. ancestors and their bones, that legitimise the present, but the present that

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There are exceptions of course, for example when a wife comes from a different village and her non-convert relatives come visiting. In 'my' convert family, the wife's sisters (a non-devotee) used to enter the kitchen and help her with the cooking. Yet, I have never observed the same happening in the case of intra-village marriages. If a non-convert woman of Dirih or Bhanjara gets married with a Shiuli man of the same villages, her sisters would not enter her kitchen.

legitimises itself through specific rules and codes of behaviours. Buddhism provides this element, hence the emphasis on discipline. A 'reunion' with ancestral bones is no more longed for, and collective secondary burials lose all their meaning. It is probably not a coincidence that the yearly secondary burial (*Jap̄topa*) ceremony was abandoned after the entry of the dharom in the village<sup>174</sup>. Ancestors and their resting-places simply become meaningless to Mundari people. They are dangerous relics of the past, and the sooner they are forgotten, the better.

Shiuli pujaris were the first ones to be buried outside their clan graveyards (and inside their *māth* instead). Today, many devotees bury their dead in their gardens. Among the most well off, a new 'fashion' has started, by which graves are not covered by stone slabs, but are made of cement instead.

Those huge cement tombs were highly appreciated by the villagers, including the non-devotees, who saw them as a sign of 'modernity'. They would comment, 'people of the city' have them. Such cement tombs reflect the devotees' new funerary rituals: officiated by Brahmans, they do not call for all villagers to carry the heavy slab stone on their shoulders, in a sort of collective farewell to the departed.

Continuity with the past was however to be seen when mourning women anointed cement tombs with oil and caressed them as they used to do with gravestones.

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<sup>174</sup> The statement is of course impossible to prove. This is, however, the way both Mundaris and Hos perceive the abandonment of that ritual.

Plate 14: Devotees' graves made of cement



Plate 15: Brahman officiating devotees' funerary rituals





Plate 16: Devotee women anointing old and new cement tombs



When graveyards are not abandoned, they are separated into different sections, clan-wise and/or gender-wise.<sup>175</sup> Mundari Soy and Gagrai clans bury their wives separately in the so-called 'graveyard of the brought-in women' (*autedkowa erakoa*

sasan) or simply 'graveyard of the guests' (*kupulkoa sasan*). The whole issue, however, is rarely made explicit, with people trying to skew it. Women in particular appeared annoyed by the idea of a separate graveyard. I remember the reaction of a woman devotee when I introduced this argument while conversing with her husband in her presence. She suddenly contributed by saying that in her natal village all clan members share a common graveyard and added she could not understand why she was going to be excluded from her husband's graveyard, after having devoted all her life to raising their children and working their fields, and the like. Although she was expressing herself jokingly, she was also resented (Ramai Gagrai's wife, 10.5.99).

I believe the development of a 'guest' graveyard originated from an individual strategy which later became an implicit 'rule' of the dharom. I remember a conversation I had with Lorhai, one of Abhiram Soy's wives, about the 'guest' graveyard of her husband's clan. She kept on explaining that 'guests' were buried separately because 'they let their children starve as they did not give them rice during rituals'. Neither my research assistant nor I could understand what she meant. I later realised that all the women buried in there were Abhiram's wives, notorious for having given birth to female offspring only. What Lohrai probably meant was that those women had been buried separately because they had not been able to contribute to the social reproduction of their husband's clan. This pattern must have then become the rule, as Abhiram was a highly influential person as well as the 'traditional' village priest who first converted to the dharom and became its guru. In other words, his behaviour must have been exemplar among the devotees and what probably started as an individual strategy later might have become a 'rule' with time.

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However, daughters or sisters, when unmarried, are included in the male section, unless they are accused of witchcraft - which is indeed often the



Women devotees are excluded from the graveyard of their husband's kin. The development of a separate 'guest' graveyard both reflects and contributes to the fact that married women are never made into 'brothers'. Wives remain 'guests' throughout their married life and even after their death. A similar phenomenon was recorded by Unnithan-Kumar among Garasia women of Rajasthan. She explained it also with reference to the fact that Garasia women retain their father's title after their marriage (1993). Even though they ritually 'cross clan', yet they are never fully incorporated into it as they grow older.

Just as separate graveyards reflect and produce gender distinctions, they also reinforce and make caste discrimination explicit and visible. The Soy, Samad, and Gagrai clans, which split each into a Ho and a Mundari section, developed separate burial grounds through time. According to the Mundaris, the death of a Ho clan fellow causes pollution (*acchut*, or untouchability) and is considered a 'big illness' regardless of the kind of death. This implies the exclusion of the corpse from the graveyard, giving rise to the Ho counterparts of originally common burial grounds.

The Gagrai clan provides one such instance. Sakari and Ruidas Gagrai had been the first clan members to be buried 'a bit outside because they made a mistake', as one of my informants explained. Their 'mistake' had been to marry Ho women without performing the 'crossing jati' ceremony for them or for their children. Hence, they too 'became Hos'. As the next chapter shows, their grandchildren are today entirely Hos, as the 'crossing jati' ceremony cannot be performed after the second generation. At the time of Sakari and Ruidas' s deaths, their relatives placed them outside the burial ground. Their tombs represented the Ho section of the Gagrai graveyard. Their descendants told me they kept on burying their dead near their father's graves and not in the original burial ground to avoid

being refused help in the burial practices by their Mundari clan-fellows. As a matter of fact, during funerary ceremonies of non-devotees, Shiulis would only help in the digging of the grave but not in the carrying of the gravestone from the river to the burial ground, as they consider the touching of the stone of a non-Shiuli as 'polluting.' Besides, they would sneak away at lunchtime to avoid commensality with them. In other words, by placing their dead elsewhere, Mundari people have not been put into a position to refuse helping and the Hos have avoided being explicitly discriminated as Hos. The development of different burial places then appears to both legitimise and contribute to the formation and public recognition of caste differences.

The funeral of Sakari Gagrai's fifth wife, a Ho woman, constitutes another such instance. After the performance of the 'calling back' ceremony, women generally anoint all burial stones with oil, while singing mourning songs and mentioning clan deceased's names one by one. On that occasion, the woman was buried in the Ho burial ground of the Gagrai clan, which is right next to the Mundari one. The women, while anointing the tombs, hesitantly dismissed some of them (as a matter of fact, all the Mundari ones) by asking themselves whether those belonged to their 'house' or not. First hesitant, they eventually avoided anointing them by stating that too many bushes covered them, anyway.

Hos explain the existence of separate graveyards in terms of intra-clan distinctions. During the above-mentioned funerals, while choosing which graves to anoint, the women asked themselves whether those graves belonged to their 'house' or not. In other words, they were reading the social discrimination in terms of house rather than caste or, putting it differently, in terms of sub-clan differentiation rather than inter-caste one. By anointing with oil some graves and neglecting others, these women were *de facto* selecting 'their' own ancestors, thus reinforcing and re-enacting the division between the two sections of the clan.

Mundaris explain the existence of different groups in terms of caste differentiation. Some months after the funeral, while talking about the existence of the two graveyards with Ramae Gagrai (a member of the Mundari branch), he commented that those women did not anoint with oil the Mundari section because 'they were not allowed to.' He further referred to the prohibition of touching corpses of people belonging to a different caste. Just like Mundaris refuse to carry the burial stones for Ho clan-fellows in order not to 'lose their caste' (*jati senotana*), so they prohibit Hos to touch their graves for the same discriminatory reason.

A burial ceremony becomes not only the occasion for public statements concerning caste memberships, but also the occasion for 'proper' ancestors to be publicly selected and 'unfitting' ones to be socially forgotten. This process appears to be undertaken by Mundaris and Hos alike, yet for different reasons. Mundaris develop separate graveyards due to their vulnerability to the 'impurity of the inferior'. Conversely, non-devotees object to the burying of the devotees' dead within graveyards' boundaries due to the latter refusal to worship the ancestors and to carry the gravestone during burial ceremonies. Whatever the case, the placing of the dead remains an activity that both reflects and reproduces social discrimination.

## **Conclusion**

Conversion to the *dharom* has brought about dramatic changes in the kinship system, marital practices and social organisation of the people under study. These changes appear to tend towards the introduction of hierarchical relations among clans and towards a devaluation of the indigenous notions of clan and consanguinity. By marrying 'endogamously', devotees attempt to perpetuate the purity of the *dharom*.

The abandonment of clan graveyards, or their bifurcation into a Ho and a Mundari section, and the periodical blessings of old houses represent yet another attempt at maintaining the purity of the group. As chapter Seven and Eight showed, their past is polluting because it is connected to witchcraft, to carnivorous spirits, to the tantric Goddess, and ultimately to a notion of the forest as a source of power.

Together with ancestors and graveyards, devotees neglect everything that has to do with their past. Mythologies (*upan-apan jagar*), songs, dancing, and the like, have to be 'forgotten'. In-married women are kept at a distance from those social occasions where this common knowledge is shared and reproduced. Shiuli youngsters would not even know where the goddesses' geographical sites are. Daughters are prevented from learning how to dance.

Ultimately, devotees are ashamed of their past as 'forest people'. By socially forgetting about their 'backward' past and by introducing new values and codes of behaviour to replace primordial ties and the teachings of the ancestors, devotees attempt to dominate wilderness and to become 'modern'. However, the next chapter will show how the 'ideology of graveyards' still prevails among some Ho-Mundas and how some of them are replacing this vacuum with a revaluation of their 'tribal' origins. These 'rebels' see the forest as a 'landscape of resistance', both against the *dikus*, as chapter Six investigated, but also against their spirits and their new values and codes of behavior.

## Chapter Nine:

### People 'who do not care' to sanskritise

*'Mundaris who use Brahmans do so because of their link with the Rajwari. They lived close to the raja. And the raja had the system of Brahmans. So they also started it. But Brahmans do their puja only when they have their stomach full. Mundaris call Brahmans at death. In true Shiulism, they have stopped performing the 'calling-back' ceremony. So the 'old and sleeping ones' are not called back home. This is not good. It's a wrong system.'*

## Introduction

The present chapter attempts an analysis of the phenomenon of de-Sanskritisation, by which 'individuals of upper castes or tribes break away from their affiliation with the parent group and culturally incorporate themselves, formally or legally, into the lower castes, acquiring altogether a new low caste identity' (Shyamlal 1992:273), a phenomenon hardly covered by the relevant literature, as far as I am aware.

The investigation focuses on the reasons and dynamics behind people's neglect of 'sanskritising' opportunities. On the one hand, there are Mundaris transforming into Hos, for whom the de-Sanskritisation theory appears to fit quite well. These are Mundari families who, after having enjoyed a high status through conversion and/or 'proper' marriages, consciously undergo a process by which they become 'full' Hos (*Hobaojanako*) and are conceptualised as adopting values and life-styles of lower caste people. On the other hand, there are people who refuse to sanskritise. These are people who prefer to retain their ancestral practices, though affiliation to the *dharom* is open to all Hos and Mundas indiscriminately.

By re-evaluating the ancestral notion of wilderness and mastery over forests, non-devotees refer to the primordial

link between land, spirits, and people - what I have defined as the 'ideology of graveyards' - as criteria for social status. To them, it is territorial precedence, rather than Brahmanical criteria of purity and pollution that legitimates higher social ranks.

The key role played by women in the process of de-Sanskritisation is also analysed. It is precisely by opposing the *dharom's* rules that they ultimately resist social discrimination. Rice-beer, the primary tool for ancestral worship and an alleged weapon in the hand of witches, becomes thus the idiom of, as well as the means, for women's assertion.

### **De-Sanskritisation**

The present analysis aims to show that Srinivas' theory of Sanskritisation (1966) cannot be extended to the entire Indian context. The term Sankritisation refers to the process by which low-caste Hindus imitate and adopt the moral values and codes of behaviour of high-caste Hindus to raise their social status. However, as I have already indicated, in the case under study, a process of 'de-Sanskritisation' is also taking place among Mundari families undergoing a process of transformation into Hos (*Ho hobaojanako*) as well as among those who refuse to sanskritise and prefer to retain their ancestral practices.

It should be clearly stated here I am not trying to invalidate Srinivas' Sanskritisation theory, a pervasive and very well established theory. In fact, the use I make of the term 'de-Sanskritisation' implies its validity. Moreover, previous chapters have shown the degree to which most Mundaris have adopted the rituals, life-styles, and norms of behaviour of high caste Hindus to raise their social status.

### **Reasons for de-Sanskritisation**

Still, despite Srinivas' theorisation, people who choose not to sanskritize in Dirih-Bhanjara do have alternative criteria for social legitimacy. They derive social status not from adoption of upper caste codes of conduct or from marrying 'proper' women, but from precedence in the clearing of the forest and in the mediation with local spirits.

Among the less politicised, de-Sanskritisation appears to be the result of a slow process, which depends upon the influence of neighbours, affines, friends and so on rather than a deliberate decision. Often, too, it is a matter of preferring a 'Ho-Mundari in-between' status, which allows to emphasise one affiliation over the other according to the circumstances, as we shall see below.

### ***The 'ideology of graveyards'***

In general, people who do not sanskritise or who de-sanskritise privilege 'the ideology of graveyards' over Hindu criteria of purity and pollution. They resist the idea that being a 'forest man' is something of which to be ashamed. They invoke and enact a notion of wilderness that does not imply inferiority. They like to say that their brave ancestors faced the ferocity of wild animals and the immense power of the British in colonising new lands; by making a pact with forest spirits, they managed to free their land both from wild animals and the colonial power, and during the Jungle Movement, their bows and arrows proved more powerful than the government's guns.

By contrast, devotees are accused of having paved the way to the colonial power. I was once told, 'in the past, British guns did not work, thanks to the power of forest spirits. However, after the *dharom* entered the village, forest spirits stopped protecting people and animals and British guns started working'. Similarly, devotees are accused today of paving the way to the Bharatya

Janata Party.

Indeed, politics is the domain where opposition to upper caste values becomes most visible. Non-devotees' call for a Jharkhand State also corresponded to a call for a refigured notion of wilderness and for autonomy that is also cultural besides being political. They refuse their subaltern position vis-à-vis the *dikus* and those behaving like *dikus*, i.e., the Mundaris. What they strive for is to be outside the cultural and political domination of the 'people of the plains'. To support their land rights' claims against the government, they use an idiom that derives from shared experiences of forest and land dispossession.

### ***Settling in forest villages - the case of the Samad clan:***

In forest villages, the 'ideology of graveyards' prevails. Chapter Seven showed how devotees are prevented from settling into those villages. Because of the close association between pioneering activities and forest spirits, devotees either relinquish their spiritual practices or they are ostracised and eventually made to leave the settlement.

It appears that it is mainly young convert couples looking for new fields that end up in forest villages. In so doing, they distance themselves from their parents and social control. The Samad clan provides an interesting instance. The previous chapter showed how the clan has a Ho and a Mundari section. The two sections originated from two brothers, the elder of which (Bowe Samad, late) opposed conversion and instructed his three sons never to abandon ancestral practices. Today, his descendants are very categorical about the need to follow the 'path of the ancestors'. They attribute most misfortunes afflicting devotees to the latter's neglect of local spirits. In contrast, the younger brother (Sunia Samad, late) converted and created the Mundari section of the clan.

Today, however, his two sons have an 'in-between' status and are in the process of 'becoming Hos'. Although 'formally' still members of the *dharom*, they are in practice neither following the



*dharom's* rules nor attending its rituals. They spend most of their time with non-devotees, especially members of the Ho Gagrai branch and of non-convert Hembroms. I often noticed their children hunting birds and building traps (as well as rescuing young birds, activities which are generally disregarded by children of devotees.

Most significantly, they are fervent Jharkhand supporters and have a house in the Jharkhand village of Maduræ Karà, where they spend most of their time. In Maduræ Karà, they resort to 'traditional' shamans in case of illnesses.

**Plate 17: 'Traditional' shaman healing a Samad girl in a forest village**



***Marrying Ho women - the Jamuda and Gagrai clans:***

Besides settling in forest villages, marriages with Ho women also lead to the transformation of convert Mundaris into Hos, unless so-called repairing 'crossing caste' ceremonies are performed. By

performing these ceremonies, which consist of a heavy fine and collective 'eating and drinking', Ho brides and their children are made into Mundari. Where such ceremonies not performed, marriage with Ho women lowers the status of the whole household.

Cases of loss of social status due to marriage with low caste women have been widely reported by Indian ethnographies (see for example Yalman 1963). They generally report caste changes occurring in the span of one generation. In contrast, my data show that it generally takes two generations of marriages with Ho women to completely transform a Mundari lineage into a Ho one. Before the third generation, people are considered as 'in-between Ho and Mundari' (*Ho-Mundarige tallare*) as they can still perform the 'crossing caste' ceremony. After the third generation, however, the ceremony cannot be performed anymore. Hence, not only the younger members of the lineage but even their forefathers lose their Mundari-ness and are depicted in Ho terms. In these cases, one could even talk of Ho caste membership being transmitted 'matrilineally'.

The cases of the Jamuda and Gagrai clans provide one such instance. In both clans, convert Mundari men married Ho women for two continuous generations. Today, their great-grandchildren are 'fully' Hos. The case of the Samad clan provides yet again another instance: the youngest members of the Mundari section of the clan were married to Ho women. No fines were ever paid nor were repairing ceremonies celebrated. As their Mundari clan-fellows frequently stated, they are becoming Hos because 'they do not care' (*ka uru*). They do not care to follow either the rules of the Mundari *samaj* or those of the Shiuli *dharom*. They do not care to pay fines to be 'socially accepted' nor to attend Chait and other Shiuli festivals. On their part, they say that it is always possible to revert from one set of practices to the other, and that they do so 'according to the circumstances'.

## **The process of de-Sanskritisation**

### **The role of younger brothers**

The foregoing ethnographic examples show that it is especially younger brothers who revert back to ancestral practices and sometimes go as far as to 'transform into Hos'. In other words, today's trend appears to be the inverse of what it used to be in the past. Chapter Seven showed how at the time of conversion, it was junior branches who adopted the *dharom* in a systematic way. Today, however, and with due exceptions, it is the youngest members of those same families that are abandoning the *dharom*. Neither married nor unmarried young men attend Shiuli rituals or go to the math. Moreover, most of them show antipathy for local Shiuli gurus and justify their desertion by accusing them of homosexuality and the use of violent methods.

Besides, the youngest members of long-time convert families are today experiencing an 'identity crisis' due to the *dharom*'s neglect of their 'tribal past' on the one hand and the discriminatory behaviours they are subject to outside their villages on the other. This vacuum is easily filled by the Jharkhand re-evaluation of their past as forest people. In general, young people find the ideology of the Jharkhand movement quite appealing. The movement provides them with that sense of 'tribal' belonging that their parents strenuously attempt to eradicate.

Plate 18: Young members of convert households near a statue of  
Birsa Munda

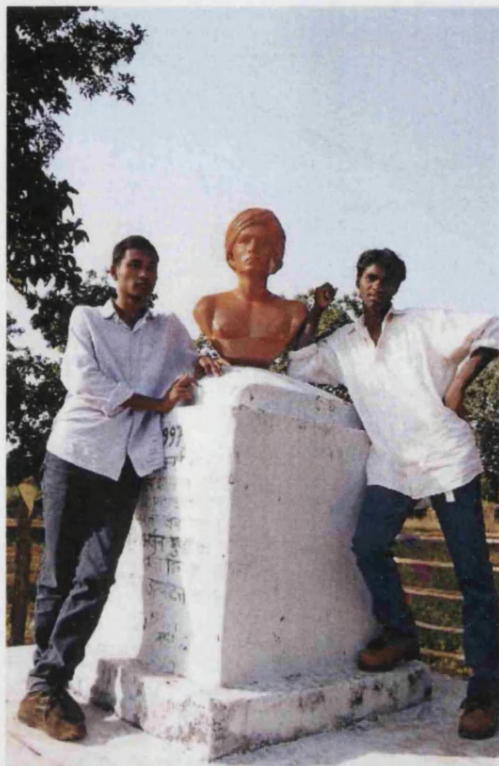


Plate 19: Young members of convert households providing  
support to the local Jharkhand committee during the State  
elections, 1999



### **The role of younger brothers' wives**

In addition, younger brothers' wives also appear to play a key role in the process of transformation into Hos. Their attitude plays a critical role in the process of re-conversion to 'the path of the ancestors'. Being the recipients of most of the *dharom's* rules, it is upon their behaviour that the status of the household ultimately depends. Ho women who get married into a converted household face a social and personal challenge, which has to do with their own subordination to male control and with the reshaping of gender relations. Normally, they end up objecting to at least part of the *dharom's* rules.

Women's resistance to the process of Sanskritisation and restriction of their autonomy can be overt or subtle. It generally assumes the form of public beer drinking and of supporting pioneering activities.

### ***Complementarity of the sexes among Hos***

Hos show a complementarity in the role of the two sexes, both within the household and in the fields. A gender-wise specialisation of labour is certainly present. Yet it would often be a matter of pride to joke about the inability of members of the opposite sex to perform certain tasks. In other words, a positive value is placed on the conjugal relationship. A marriage forms a core and co-operative unit, a 'house' (*owa*). Men take also care of child-bearing. Fathers often carry their children on their hips while I seldom see mothers holding their own children, except while breast-feeding. Husbands also often help with the cooking. Not only would they cook in case the wife was ill or absent, but they would also proudly assert that they could boil rice as properly as their wives could. Husbands and wives are often seen side by side working either in their fields or in the courtyard of their house. Newly formed couples build their new house together, preparing the mud, carrying the stones,



and gathering the wood. In a Ho household, wives first serve the food but then immediately join their family to eat together, men and women alike. The conversation flows from both sides, irrespective. I often witnessed husbands and wives making fun of one another or publicly criticising each other while sitting on the mat together.

**Plate 20: Old husband and wife sitting on the same mat while preparing garlands for Sorai Parob (Dewali)**



***Dominance of males among converts***

The picture is different in a convert household. Sunita, my host Virendra's's wife, always stood up from the mat when her husband or her father-in-law approached with the intention of sitting on it. Also, it is improper for Mundari women to talk to their husbands in front of other people. In eighteen months spent in Virendra's house, I never once had the chance to listen to Sunita talking to her husband in my presence, nor to any other man (except her son and her servant), be it a member of the family or not. Nor did she ever talk to her father-in-law and vice-versa, all requests being transmitted

through the children or me. At meals, Sunita would first serve the food to her husband and her father-in-law and only later would she eat, in another room. I have never seen husband and wife eat together. Gender discrimination works also outside the village: one day I was having tea in a stall in the local market with Vibuti Soy, a Mundari convert. When his wife entered the teashop, she sat some meters away from us. I invited her to join us but she kept declining my invitation. Vibuti then explained to me that husbands and wives were not allowed to sit together in public.

### ***Female sexuality***

More importantly, Ho women are powerful because they are in control of their own sexuality. They are the ones who decide to whom to get married or at least have the final word on proposed grooms. Early marriage is not contemplated. After their puberty, unmarried sisters 'escape' their parents' direct control by living in independent quarters. Marriage in general is not seen as an urgent matter and is solicited only in case of pregnancy. Girls' sexual and personal freedom allows them to enjoy the company of mates. On particular festivities, their 'night migrations' from village to village work as occasions for the selection of partners. Along the same lines, brides enjoy the freedom to leave their conjugal home and settle with someone else at any time after their marriage. Indeed, there are many cases of women who marry three, four, or even six times. There is no fixed rule for what concerns the return of the bride price to the first husband, which is in fact very rarely the case, especially when the couple has had children. Along the same lines, among the Hos, widow remarriage is not disapproved of, and levirate is still frequently performed.

In everyday life, too, women move freely and go to the market, in groups or alone, to buy and sell products, to sell or drink beer or simply to hang around and catch up with news about friends and kin.

Plate 21: Ho women selling rice-beer





Such freedom of movement and the lack of values related to modesty and virginity allow women to get married at a late age, their bride price not being related to those values.<sup>176</sup> Marriage becomes necessary in case women remain pregnant, yet it is they who have the monopoly of knowledge about abortion and contraception. As Rosaldo stated, 'women who never marry yet have intercourse with a wide range of men, may again be making positive use of their 'anomalous' sexuality. Because it is both feared and desired, it gives them a real source of power' (1974:38). By being more in control of their sexuality than their Mundari counterparts, the power of Ho women is reaffirmed.

The enormous power of women in the process of de-Sanskritisation and resistance to conversion explains convert Mundaris' obsession with arranged marriages and the choice of a 'proper' bride for their sons. Notwithstanding the attempts of parents at controlling the marital life of their sons, however, many do in practice get married to local women. They explain those 'shameful' marriages by referring to the early death of the groom's parents or to the grooms' carelessness. Ram Singh Pareya, a Mundari, married a Ho woman and never performed the 'crossing caste' ceremony. People say his father was one of the richest men of the village. After his death, however, Ram Singh has not been able to manage the property, which is now going to ruin. He cannot spare rice for advance payments of wage labourers and is careless with respect to ceremonies and social obligations. His mother left her house to live separately to avoid being depicted as a Ho like her daughter-in-law and being accused of witchcraft.

### ***The role of affines***

Ethnographic evidence shows that wives' parents and relatives from their native villages have a strong sanctioning power.

They generally disfavour *dharom*'s prescriptions and even go as far as to encourage subversion of its rules and threaten the outcasting of the girl. When a woman is outcasted, her mother's brother will refuse to perform her children's rites of passage, such as, the 'piercing of the ear' and marriage or death functions. Were the 'piercing of the ear' performed without their mother's brother, the children would be defined as 'orphan' and stigmatised. Moreover, that very ceremony is propaedeutic for the performance of marriage, and the latter for 'the putting of the slab-stone', and this for the land distribution among the deceased's heirs. Ultimately, then, the mediation of the bride's brother is ideally necessary for her children to receive their share of land at the death of their father (in practice however this never prevented heirs from receiving their share of land). This fundamental role played by affines during rites of passage is downplayed by Mundaris, as they use (or say they use) Hindu specialists instead. Other rites, like the 'piercing of the ear', are performed during the marriage ceremony, again by a Brahman.

The fact that non-convert affines resent the *dharom*'s rules is shown by the case of Budhram Bandra, a Ho pujari of the *dharom*. His first wife's parents and mother's brother had threatened to 'abandon' him, were he really to refuse the exchange of rice-beer and the 'eating and drinking' with them because of religious restrictions. Especially after he married a second wife, his position *vis-à-vis* his affines became rather vulnerable. Yet to be abandoned by affines equals social death. He therefore started a new *dharom* called the 'Gautam Buddha' *dharom*, as opposed to the Buddh *dharom*, which, according to him, allows for the drinking of rice-beer on the basis that 'Gautam Buddha never forbade drinking and exchanging beer with guests!'

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<sup>176</sup> This confirms Yalman (1963)'s argument about the close connection between the anxiety concerning female sexuality purity, puberty rites, and pre-puberty marriage and Brahmanical values - with the due exceptions.

## **Perceptions of de-Sanskritisation**

Ho-Munda 'in-between' people exchange women and beer with the Hos, hang around with them, go to the market together, dance with them, help each other in the preparation of fields, in the fixing of house's roofs, work together as wage labourers in Mundari fields, perform sacrifices and eat the sacrificial meat together. Day after day, they take a step further on the path that widens the gap between them and members of the Mundari *samaj*. Lineages who become entirely Ho are eventually 'abandoned' (*bage*) by agnates as well by the affines of the husband's clan. People explain this phenomenon in economic and social terms.

### **The economic rationale**

From an economic point of view, de-Sanskritisation appears the most convenient choice, as it permits to avoid both the payment of heavy fines (as prescribed by the *dharom*) and the ritual killing of expensive animals (as prescribed by ancestral practices). More generally, a 'price has to be paid' to gain the respect of the *dharom* people. The *dharom* imposes a series of restrictions on activities like hunting and, to women, on activities like the selling of forest products and rice-beer, which are fundamental for the survival of those who cannot count on alternative income. Non-devotees accuse devotees of 'madness' since they 'make their own life even more complicated than what it already is', with a clear reference to their rejection of both survival strategies and to their challenge of the words of the ancestors.

### **The social rationale**

Besides, devotees are publicly held responsible for having introduced norms of behaviour, which deviate from 'custom'. Non-devotees would emphasise the fact that their forefathers never used Brahmans but rather affines to perform rites of passage. In the case of marriages, for example, they would point out the inability of Brahmans to read the omens on the path to the groom's house (*ere-bonga*) and to perform the due

sacrifices. Not only are Brahmins depicted as useless (*bekar*) and greedy (*jombui*), as they always ask for gifts (*dan*), but their ignorance about the path of the ancestors can also be quite dangerous not only for the devotees but for the whole village.<sup>177</sup>

What they resent most however is the social discrimination introduced by the devotees, which transforms 'brothers' into 'strangers'. According to them, social harmony is necessary to colonise new tracts of forests and survive in dangerous and inhospitable environments:

*'In the past, local spirits took care of goats and cows, so that there was no need for shepherds. And if someone wanted to kill someone else, again the spirits would prevent him to do so. [...] In the past, Munda-Ho people were very united. We would not have been able to clear the jungle had we killed each other. We were all here for the same reason, to make fields, to clear new land. We can eat only by keeping united. Today, in this village, only about five people out of one hundred follow the rules of the past. They all go to school to come back with their MA, BA, and MSc and make fun of us.'*

Janak Samad, 29.05.1999.

Villagers are now said 'to steal and kill each other' as a consequence of having betrayed the words of their forefathers. The *dharom* is seen as an obstacle to social harmony and the source of 'mutual discrimination' (*hapatin*, reciprocal form of the verb *hatin*, to divide). As one Shiuli pujari, Abhiram

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<sup>177</sup> People told me that the newly married couple would remain childless and the wedding guests would die during the ceremony itself, were those sacrifices not done properly. I guess the importance of those sacrifices has probably been over-emphasised; nevertheless this denotes an intention of preserving custom and protecting it from external tendencies towards change.

Bandra, explained, all Ho-Mundas originated from the same ancestor and used to 'eat and drink together'. Later in time - at the time of conversion - they started to discriminate caste-wise and to become jealous of one another (*hi-pi-singa*, reciprocal form of *hisinga*, to become jealous). Or similarly:

*'People of the Mundari samaj talk like this: you drink alcohol and you worship fowls, therefore you must leave our caste. Or they also talk like this: look, that one brought a Ho woman, that one a Dom woman, that one a Ghansi woman. And they also say that these people are thieves and dishonest'.*

Janak Samad, 29.05.1999

People's opposition to Brahmanical values does not appear to be just a matter of weakness, careless behaviour, and of penalties yet to be paid, as the devotees would want it. In fact, it is a matter of different *Weltanschauungen*.

Non-devotees ultimately know they are discriminated against and each of them reacts differently. What they all share is their Jharkhand affiliation. Indeed, the Jharkhand ideology is not only associated with ancestral teachings and practices, but it also fights against caste discrimination. As its supporters say, 'all forest people belong to a common jati, that of the bows and arrows'. Or, as the Birsa Aba affirmed during a Jharkhand meeting:

*'We should consider everyone as belonging to the Jharkhand samaj [...] We should never forget our bows and arrows. If we do, we will forget our own jati. [...] There used to be no jati nor dharom discrimination in the past, but today's leaders are establishing it to divide us adivasi [...] we should forget about it and all vote for Jharkhand.'*

In sum, the scenario appears to be similar to the one identified by David Hardiman among the Bhils of the Dang, whereby colonial rule led to the development of two widely contrasting subaltern mentalities. One 'was rooted in memories of times of former power in the forest' and did not join 'reformist sects which inculcate a more Hinduized way of life. They have, therefore, hardly compromised at all.' (Hardiman 1994: 146) The other 'did, on the other hand, try to adapt their way of life to the changes. [...] Rather than being weighed down by memories of the past, they looked for a better future in which they would be able to live a life of purity and prosperity. They believed this could be achieved through the reform of their habits and customs. Reformers among them demanded that they give up their beliefs in evil spirits, renounce liquor and meat, and take daily baths' (1994:145).

Just as the non-devotees of Dirih-Bhanjara, the former group 'refused to order their life in that calculating manner which was now needed to ensure a life of modest sufficiency. They continued to be generous with their earnings, spending any money they obtained freely. They resisted being educated. They refused, in other words, to try to compete in the capitalist world on the terms which that world demanded for even a modicum of success' (1994:145). On the political side, they 'refused the political system, calling instead for an adivasi state that is independent of the government in Delhi [...] There is now a strong agitation to allow people to resettle the villages which they were forced by the British to abandon at the time of the forest demarcations' (1994:146-147).

## **Idioms of de-Sanskritisation: rice beer drinking and witchcraft**

Rice-beer drinking constitutes the idiom for talking about such different *Weltanschauungen*. Non-devotees are depicted as 'those who drink' and vice-versa. Hence, the act of drinking acquires a value of statement about one's social, religious, and political choices.<sup>178</sup>

As men 'become weak and careless drinkers', their 'wives become witches'. Although males who drink are greatly despised, it is female drinking which is socially polluting. It is the latter's behaviour that leads to social degradation and eventually to a transformation into Hos. Interestingly enough, I observed many instances of devotees drinking in public. Yet, they did not run any risk of losing their status as long as their women are known for their alcohol abstinence. Were their wives to drink and to sell rice-beer, the whole family would almost invariably be depicted as 'transforming into Hos'. And indeed, it is precisely the women's drinking habits that appear to play a fundamental role in the opposition to sanskritising opportunities.

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<sup>178</sup> During the first days of my fieldwork, I remember people curiously enquiring with my research assistant 'whether I drank or not'. My positive answers would cause an atmosphere of general consent and long and articulate comments about it, especially among old women. During my entire stay, people never get tired of asking me that same question. Again, my positive answer would visibly make them happy. My drinking or not must have constituted an issue to the people, as it reflected my political and religious 'affiliation'. I had to take a 'position', and the fact that I was living in a Shiuli family was already putting some distance between non-devotees and me. However, this did not happen thanks to my emphatic declarations about how tasteful rice-beer was.

Plate 22: Ho women drinking rice-beer



Mundari non-convert women are the most 'out-of-place', from the devotees' perspective. In a way, those women represent the real threat to the devotees' essentialist aspirations for a higher social status. They would be especially careful never to miss market days and would come back at sunset with their baskets empty and their pockets full of small money or other products, a constituent part of their income. In the market,



they would hang around until late, sell whatever they could gather from the forest, and openly drink rice-beer. They would dance all night long during festivals, visit their kinsmen in neighbouring villages, and move more freely in general.

Devotees depict this behaviour as driven by evil spirits and a sure sign of witchcraft. Greed is the general explanation for their craft. I soon learnt that witches are characterised by assertiveness, an outgoing attitude, and lack of timidity and fear. Similarly, among other Indian tribals, it was recorded that the witch 'usually happens to be the most notorious, quarrelsome, and troublesome woman in a family, or one gifted with the longest, broadest, and sharpest tongue in a family' (Antia 1919:873, as quoted in Skaria 1997:120). By contrast, victims of witchcraft are generally considered to be fearful and weak persons, like children or people during rites of passage or more generally people under the influence of a strong character (see also Babb 1975:207 and Fuller 1992:239). And jealousy (*hisinga*) is what drives witches' actions.

The Gagrai woman mentioned in chapter Seven is considered one of the most powerful witches of the village. Yet to me, she was one of the funniest and most good-humoured inhabitants. The first time we met, she introduced herself in a very assertive and audacious way as 'The very important one, the very good one' (*Hesu marang, hesu bugin*). Considering the generally shy and reserved nature of most of the villagers, that introduction sounded more like a provocation that could not completely understand. She then started laughing in great enjoyment of her own joke. I soon learnt to recognise her loud but never irritating laugh. When I told Rasai about her joke, he grew pale and exhorted me never to talk with her again as, he said, she was a 'poisonous woman'.

According to Rasai, the old woman's joke was a statement about lack of fear and about her power to challenge witchcraft accusations. Being a 'very good and very important person',

what else on earth could she crave and long for? By stating that she does not need to be envious, she was probably challenging witchcraft accusations<sup>179</sup>.

Her display of qualities and wealth might have represented 'a sign of intentionality and power: a woman who is feared often has power' (Rosaldo 1974:38). And similarly, 'ideas of purity and pollution, so often used to circumscribe female activities, may also be used as a basis for assertions of female solidarity, power, or value' (Rosaldo 1974:38). The showing-off of one's status, one's qualities, or one's feminine energy is then a statement about power, about independence, about women being their own source of vital energy. The following ethnographic extracts give further evidence of it.

Romeshwar Soy, Rasai's younger brother, is a non-convert Mundari whose wife is accused of keeping him away from the *dharom*. She is considered one of the most dangerous witches of the village. As they were my neighbours, Rasai kept on encouraging me to keep the door of my quarters closed: 'otherwise goats will enter', he used to say. In fact, it was clear he was afraid of my neighbour's famous evil eye, and I stubbornly kept the door open until he confessed he was afraid of her setting her gaze upon me: 'she will use her sorcery craft to kill you. She just needs to look at your food, no need for her to cook it. By just looking at it she will throw something inside it (*bongaburu*), and you will be dead within a

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<sup>179</sup> Alleged witches generally react to these accusations by publicly challenging them. On occasion of the ritual 'rice in the fields' (*pīr mandi*), one of these famous 'eating and drinking' sessions where men and women cooked together, I suddenly realised I was allegedly surrounded by the most dangerous witches of the village. I remember my hesitation at accepting the rice cooked by 'The very important one', the old Ho Gagrai woman mentioned above. I remember thinking I had just promised Rasai I would be careful about eating with Hos. And now there I was, again. The woman's son stared at me very seriously and exhorted me to accept food. He told me that I should have learnt by then that they were trustworthy. I told him I had learnt it, and eventually ate their boiled rice and drank their rice-beer. As Bloch also suggested, 'an invitation given and accepted is not an act of solidarity; it is also always a test. Will you dare to eat with me and become one?' (Bloch 1999: 145). By accepting their

few hours'. Nobody would ever dare to eat or drink from her or in her presence. Most people would even avoid talking to her and would never cross the gate of her courtyard. She is a loud, noisy, and fearless woman. The village ostracism towards Romeshwar and his family appears to be the only 'legal' weapon left to counteract witchcraft.

Romeshwar, however, does not seem to agree with these accusations. Indeed, some twenty years ago, he even denounced his brother and other villagers of witchcraft accusations against his wife to the local police. Romeshwar never tried to hide his wealth, either to me or to the other villagers. Both his financial status and his non-conversion were a matter of pride to him. He would unusually list his sources of income and the exact amount of money in his bank accounts. Moreover, he would explain the fact that he was ostracised by overtly referring to the envy people had of his wealth. By displaying all his wealth, he was probably showing to the world that he did not need to be jealous.

One day during the last week of my fieldwork, I heard a loud and desperate female weeping coming from their house. Nobody intervened as the household had been ostracised and whoever entered the courtyard would be liable to punishment. Except, of course, me. Romeshwar's daughter-in-law was weeping from pain as her left arm and hand were extremely swollen and half-rotten. Usually a very sweet and good-humorous woman, she talked nonsense from the pain. I naively enquired about the cause and she replied with irony that it must have been a mosquito bite. I believe she thought her mother-in-law was responsible, yet I have no evidence to confirm this. The day after, a pujari came from a near-by village and put some herbs around her arm. After a couple of days, the arm looked better already. But then it was Romeshwar who got the same infection and his arm too started to get swollen and rotten. This fact

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food, I passed the test and indeed, they gratefully let me inside their house for the first time and I became a bit less diku to their eyes.

reinforced suspicions about Romeshwar's wife and Rasai kept wondering about the reasons why his brother was still keeping her in his house. He complained again about his brother being a careless person who did not listen to his elder brother's instructions but remained feebly under the spell of 'that witch'.

On her part, the woman looked as if she did not care about these accusations. She would always come back from the market completely drunk, and her loud voice would be heard until late at night. At the time of her daughter-in-law's wounds, she came up to me and pulled up the lower part of her sari. She showed me her bottom while complaining about a wound she also allegedly had. She was making fun of her crying daughter-in-law and at the same time challenging people's accusations about her being responsible for those wounds. She was showing her fearless and careless nature. If it was not for their belonging to the pioneering and influential Soy clan, Romeshwar's family would have probably been depicted as 'Ho' by then. Instead, they had been ostracised.

By that time, the car had arrived and my fieldwork had come to an end. While my friends were loading the car, after all the farewells and crying and the tragedy of my leaving the village had reached its climax, I was asked by Romeshwar whether I could give him a lift to the town where a proper doctor could look at his arm. On our way, we had our last and melancholic chats in Ho language. At my enquiries about the reason for such a swollen arm, he kept on accusing other villagers' jealousy. Not even during that last chat did he accuse his wife.

## Conclusion

This thesis is an ethnographic and historical exploration of opposing sanskritising and de-sanskritising tendencies among an *adivasi* community of northern India.

On the one hand, the thesis tells the story of how conversion to a Hindu reformist movement leads to the adoption of high-caste values and behaviours and how this contributes to the transformation of flexible social and cultural differences among agnates into rigid boundaries and caste discrimination. The analysis highlights the relationship between Sanskritisation and 'modernising' ambitions, by showing how a 'tribal' group living at the fringe of the Hindu world adopts high caste values and codes of behaviour to move away from what is perceived as its 'backward' past and 'primitive' tribal customs.

On the other hand, the thesis also explores the reverse process of 'de-Sanskritisation', by which people retain and revive their ancestral practices and adhere to what can be defined as 'the ideology of graveyards' rather than to Brahmanical criteria for social status. These people are either those who refuse to sanskritise and prefer to retain their ancestral practices, or those who revert to traditional values and life-styles after having previously converted.

Throughout the thesis, the opposition *hatu-buru*, or village-forest, tamed-untamed, civilisation-wilderness and modernity-tradition, is used as the 'analytical lens' to explain both social change and resistance to change. Ultimately, the thesis shows how the introduction of caste discrimination among 'brothers' threatens the continuity between opposites and how the 'Hindu plains' become the space of modernity and civilisation, while the forest loses its value as a mode of subsistence and as a marker of identity. At the same time, it

also shows how resistance to Sanskritisation is nurtured by pioneering activities. People who resist to change tame the wilderness not by adopting Brahmanical values but rather by adhering to ancestral practices, beliefs and values and by clearing and settling tracts of forest. To them, the forest remains a source of power and a nurturing place.

The thesis further shows how those dichotomies also take on a gender dimension. In general, among converts and non-converts alike, women transform wilderness into domesticity and affinity into consanguinity by transforming 'wild' rice grains (*baba*) into 'homely' food (*mandi*, boiled rice) and wild roots into rice-beer. At the margin of the tamed and the untamed, women are associated with extreme meanings, like motherhood and witchcraft. Rice-beer, a female monopoly, embodies both nourishing and poisoning values and symbolises the ambiguity of women.

The thesis shows how the physical and symbolical organisation of houses and graveyards makes this process of continuous transformation explicit. It is men who belong to the localised lineage and spiritually connect to the land they settle. Conversely, women move to their husband's village and shift loyalties. Among the non-converts, women eventually become agnates and part of a *hatu* with their final burial in the graveyards. Their souls and bones meet those of the other ancestors in the house and in the graveyard to contribute to the physical and social reproduction of the lineage.

By contrast, among the converts, female energy and wilderness represent a constant threat and hence women are never fully incorporated but retain their affinal status even after death. The settlement, the tamed, is a male domain and a gateway to 'modernity' and 'civilisation', while women are associated with wilderness and the untamed. They are polluting and contagious, and are often held responsible for the 'loss of caste', or reversion to ancestral practices and life-styles.

The more powerful women are, the more polluting they tend to be and the more they are accused of witchcraft practices.

These different ideologies are made explicit in the political sphere. The non-converts maintain their traditional allegiance to the Jharkhand party, which represents the natural continuation of centuries of tribal uprisings against land and forest dispossession. Locally, the Jharkhand party is the political incarnation of the 'ideology of graveyards'. This holds that ancestral practices legitimise *adivasis'* territorial claims based on graveyards as land title deeds. On the contrary, the converts detach themselves from the forest as a mode of subsistence and as an icon of their 'substance'. They also reject the 'ideology of graveyards' and embrace conservation and environmental concerns about the alleged depletion of forest resources. The worship of new and foreign spirits allows for their 'liberation' from wilderness and from their 'shameful' past as 'forest people'. Conversion to a Hindu reformist movement hence represents the first step towards a shift of allegiance to the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP).

In conclusion, this thesis shows how Sanskritisation represents a means for 'forest people' to transform into a new kind of people, the devotees (*dharom-hōko*) and join the Hindu mainstream. By contrast, those who do not convert or revert to ancestral practices adhere to a positive notion of forest and wilderness. To them, *the rebels*, the worship of local forest spirits legitimises their territorial presence and their pioneering activities.

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