

Accessing Nature: Agrarian Change, Forest Laws and their Impact on an Adivasi Economy in Colonial India

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Abstract

This article discusses how changing access to nature impacted an adivasi people, the Hos of Singhbhum. Without romanticizing the pre-British past, it may be argued that for the Hos of the time there had been dependence both on the forest and on cultivation, which had ensured them a minimum livelihood. This paper explores how their access to nature gradually diminished under colonial rule through the twin governmental policies of expansion of the agrarian frontier and restriction of the forests to the indigenous population. This led to the sedentarisation of the adivasis, further contributing towards agrarian expansion in India. However, this article argues that the extension of cultivation did not, however, benefit the Hos. Instead, the nature of the increase in acreage in Singhbhum, led to new agricultural practices, which, together with the restrictive forest laws and lack of new irrigation facilities, led to an agrarian crisis in the region, forcing the Hos to leave their lands and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Keywords: forest, agriculture, adivasi, famine, migration

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concerns of agrarian history and those of environmental history have tended to develop almost in opposition to each other (Bhattacharya 1998). Although the implications of the agrarian landscape had been discussed exhaustively in the seminal work of Irfan Habib (Habib 1999), agrarian history since then has largely concentrated on the modes and the social relations of production, often relegating the changing rural environment to a position of secondary significance¹. As a result, as Agarwal & Sivaramakrishnan point out, agrarian histories of India tended to concentrate on the 'arable heartlands', overlooking the mountains and forests, which, particularly since the 1980s, have come to be seen as the preserves of environmental history (Agarwal & Sivaramakrishnan 2001). In its early phase, Indian environmental history focused on the impact of colonial natural resource management, particularly the forests, and British rule was identified as marking a watershed in the ecological history of India (Guha 1989). Other notable works have reaffirmed this focus on the history of the relationship between forests, the state and the forest dwellers, particularly

adivasis (Grove *et al.* 1998), so much so that the latter has come to be considered as the rightful subjects of environmental history, while settled peasant tracts continue to be the domain of agrarian history. Recent researches have once again drawn attention to the linkages between agrarian and forest economies (Prasad 1998). This article similarly focuses on the close ties between the forest and agriculture in the *adivasi* economy. It attempts to relate the history of forests in Singhbhum² with the agrarian history of the region under colonial rule and argues that the interdependence between agriculture and forest and their complementary roles in the livelihood needs of the people gradually became sharply demarcated during British rule. In this sense, the notion of British colonial rule marking a crucial watershed in the ecological history of India can certainly be applied to Singhbhum.

In their pioneering work on the environmental history of India, Guha and Gadgil have argued that the precolonial use of the forest was 'prudent', first, because of the existence of a 'cultural tradition of prudence' at the level of the community, which they termed 'conservation from below', and secondly, because of the particular use and control of the forest resources at the level of the precolonial state, both of which

were disturbed in various ways in the colonial period (Guha & Gadgil 1992). This argument has been rejected by others who assert that it would be anachronistic to attribute a sense of environmentalism to religious practices which effectively resulted in the preservation of forests³ (Grove 1995) and that *adivasis* could not be considered in any way to be the natural conservators of their environment (Hardiman 1998). It has also been pointed out that the 'cultural tradition of prudence' did not have the kind of ecological implication as had been supposed, since it actually meant exclusion of a specified village space from cultivation forever, and not its prudent and regulated use (Chaudhuri 2004). An analysis of the changing nature of the use and control of the forest in precolonial and colonial Singhbhum corroborates some of these arguments. The close affinity between humans and nature as seen among the *adivasis* of the region should not lead to the assumption that they were in any way ecologically conscious conservators of the forest. Since *adivasi* societies had no recognisable means of knowing if going beyond a certain limit could damage the locality's ecosystem in the long run, we may conclude that notions such as 'conservation' and 'protection' were unknown and did not influence their use of resources.

The article also engages in the debate concerning agrarian development under British rule. On the basis of George Blyn's statistics (Blyn 1966), nationalist historians for long interpreted the impact of colonial policies on Indian agriculture in terms of stagnation. It has been argued, for instance, that British revenue policies, which functioned as a 'built-in depressor', effectively resulted in the flight of capital from the countryside and precluded any form of improvement in agricultural production (Thorner 1962). Challenging the nationalist paradigm, recent studies have assumed that the passing of the colonial forest laws, which restricted access to forests, assisted in the process of agrarian expansion through sedentarisation of marginal groups, such as *adivasis* and nomadic pastoralists. C.A. Bayly has argued persuasively that British rule in course of the nineteenth century had in fact resulted in the 'consolidation of the Indian peasantry' as pastoralist groups and shifting cultivators were increasingly forced to take to settled cultivation (Bayly 1988). Yet, as this article argues, the expansion of settled cultivation did not necessarily negate the pauperisation of the peasantry as is evidenced by developments in west Singhbhum. Instead, the increase in acreage during the colonial period led to an agrarian crisis in Singhbhum as it involved a major departure from the traditional land use and livelihood patterns that had developed on the basis of the topography and climate of the region, forcing a large section of *adivasis* to leave their lands and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

The article has four sections. The first section traces the principal features of the livelihood pattern that had developed among the Hos, the dominant *adivasi* group in Singhbhum, in the precolonial period. The second section analyses the nature of agrarian expansion under colonial rule; the third section highlights the constraints to access to the forest for the *adivasis* since the late nineteenth century, while the final section

explores the impact of these changes on the lives of the Hos.

LAND USE PATTERN IN EARLY COLONIAL SINGHBHUM

In the early nineteenth century, Singhbhum district was a thickly forested, rugged country, protected by hill ranges and watered by numerous rivers. It was fertile and productive in some places and stony and barren in others. Many diverse ethnic communities inhabited this space, the Oraon, the Munda, the Gond, the Bhuiya, the Bhumij, the Tamarua and the Ho. The latter were the most numerous and the southwestern part of Singhbhum district, locally known as Kolhan, was almost exclusively peopled by them. Northern Kolhan was mostly open and gently undulating, with numerous villages. The south also was a flat, open country, thickly populated and well cultivated. Even in the cultivated regions forests interspersed with villages. The open areas of Kolhan were scattered with scrub jungle, composed chiefly of *palash* and *asan* trees. The south, where not cultivated, was covered with extensive grassy plains, while the south-west and west were mountainous and heavily forested. On the extreme south-western corner of Singhbhum was the wildest part of the district, the Saranda hills, a mass of inaccessible rocky summits covered with dense jungle. Formerly under the control of indigenous ruling dynasties, western Singhbhum was brought under the direct administration of the British in 1837 with the formation of the Kolhan Government Estate.

The economy of the Hos was characterised by the interdependence between forest and settled cultivation. The distinction between forest and pasture was often blurred and overlapping, and in many places, clearings would revert to forests on being abandoned. Thus, a Ho village consisted not only of a certain area capable of immediate cultivation, but a considerable forest area as well, over which *adivasi* groups claimed their respective areas of control. When local pressures upon land became too great, several households would move away from the village to clear another part of the forest, in the process becoming *khuntkattidars* or original clearers. Conversely, villages would revert to forest on being abandoned. The most important role of the forests lay in providing food. Forests provided edible fruit, roots, leaves and flowers and game which constituted an important part of the Ho diet. Because of this dependence, tribal areas were less susceptible to famines and we do not get any report of any major food shortage in Kolhan Government Estate in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time of recurring famines in the Chota Nagpur region⁴. The forests also provided the grazing grounds for the large herds of cattle and buffaloes that the Hos owned. Thus, the forest was deeply imbricated in the material and cultural life of the region.

Among peasant pastoral groups in India there had always existed various culturally determined concepts of the forest⁵. Hos too recognised two forms of forests. The sacred grove, the *jahira* or the *sarna*, was part of the village or *hatu*. The larger forest which lay beyond the village was the *bir*. *Bir* in fact

signified wildness in contrast to the *hatu*, which represented the civilised and the term was used interchangeably to indicate both the forest and the state of being wild or unkempt (Deeney 1978). A portion of the original forest was customarily preserved as the *jahira* which was believed to be the residence of Dessauli, the village deity and his consort Maburu. The Hos believed that the grove deities were responsible for the crops and had the power to ward off diseases and epidemics. They were therefore especially honoured in all great agricultural festivals and the strictest taboo was maintained against cutting trees of the *jahira*. Even the taking of wood of fallen trees out of the *jahira* was forbidden because it was feared that the sylvan gods would then abandon the locality and withhold seasonal rain; desecration of the *jahira* met with expulsion from the community. In contrast to the *jahira*, however, the *bir* could be cleared for cultivation. It was also the abode of wild animals and the *bongas*, the many benevolent and malevolent spirits, who had to be propitiated through rituals and sacrifices. The forest therefore was both revered and feared. The significance of the forest to the lives of the Hos can be seen from the social and religious ceremonies that developed around it. One event of great social and cultural significance was the hunt which the Hos organised as did the other *adivasi* groups of the region. Often they would join with other groups such as the Mundas, the Santals and the Oraons to form bigger hunts (Bradley-Birt 1910). The hunting expedition was organised by the villagers and the population of the entire village acted as a corporate unit. Hunts therefore had a social relevance as well and served to strengthen communal solidarity within the village.

At the time of the British annexation, settled agriculture based on plough cultivation and a certain amount of artificial irrigation had come to prevail among the Hos although various forms of shifting cultivation was also practised in inhospitable areas⁶ (Singh 1985). A variety of agricultural techniques had developed over the ages in an environment which consisted of a hilly, forested terrain, with a hot, dry climate and low rainfall for most parts of the year. In the precolonial period, settlement patterns, land utilisation and agricultural practices in Chota Nagpur had developed in consonance with the landform of the region (Prasad 1973; for a discussion of topography and land utilisation patterns in Chota Nagpur, see Mohapatra 1990). The heavy monsoon rainfall in Singhbhum created run-offs which washed away the topsoil from the ridges and deposited it at the bottom of the valleys. Periodic flooding of larger rivers also resulted in rich alluvial deposits on the banks. Hence there was great variation in the depth and character of the soil, ranging from the rich alluvial soil at the valley bottoms to the poor quality, dry, gravelly soil at the top of the ridges. To ensure the optimal utilisation of the arable space, villages in Singhbhum, as indeed throughout the Chota Nagpur region, typically tended to occupy the tops of the ridges as these were the least fertile zones. However, both the ridges and the valleys were utilised for agriculture, but the latter was more fertile since it had the heavier soil with a higher water retention capacity.

Settled agriculture involved the application of differing techniques. There were two broad categories of the arable

lands: rice lands and the uplands. Rice lands were further classified, according to quality, as the *bera* and *bad*, and the uplands as *gora* and *bakai*. In northern parts of Chota Nagpur the corresponding local categories were *tanr* (uplands) and *don* (rice lands) (Mohapatra 1991). *Bera* consisted of the fertile agricultural land located at the bottom of the valleys and in the depressions which was used for winter rice and for linseed, pulses and barley. Since it was irrigated by reservoirs, streams and springs *bera* was safe from drought but could be damaged by excessive rain. *Bera* lands were also richer since the topsoil of the ridges was washed down onto them and they also retained the moisture longer. Thus, unlike the *bad* lands, these did not require a heavy and well-distributed rainfall. In the *bera* lands, rice was usually transplanted. The embanked paddy lands at the top of the slopes were known as the *bad*, that is, the second quality rice lands. On these lands paddy was usually sown broadcast when the rains began in June and hence a well-distributed and heavy rainfall was needed to ensure a good crop. *Bad* lands were further classified locally as *longar* or *nali*, which consisted of the better quality *bad* lands on the slopes, and as *bad*, *badi* or *pi* or a third class of rice lands which lay on the top of the slopes (Tuckey 1920). The *longar* land included both the long, narrow strip of lowland lying between saddles of high land and also the fields low down on the slopes of rice lands which received drainage from the terraces above it. The output in the *longar* lands was the same as that of the *bera* in a good year, but could fail in a dry year.

Together with settled cultivation, a form of semi-permanent cultivation (variously known as *gora* cultivation and as *purunga*) persisted, even during the nineteenth century, in the steeper slopes of the upland areas which had lighter soils. Customarily, every Ho had the right to clear the forests for *gora* cultivation. Clearances then would be abandoned periodically for fresh clearings in the forest. Shifting cultivation was commonly practised in the south, particularly in the *pirs*⁷ of Saranda, Latua and Relia, which were mountainous and heavily forested. Clearances located close to the villages, the *bari* or *bakai*, were manured and cultivated and could yield two crops a year, usually millet and mustard, but those situated at a distance were known as the *gora* and were roughly cultivated with more hardy crops such as coarse millets and oilseeds, though occasionally these were also used for rice cultivation. Here the practice was to fell the trees in the forest, burn the felled produce and mix the ashes with the soil and then cultivate the area. Usually the first crop of millet or pulse was sown while the bared trunks were still standing; but in the following hot season these were set on fire at the roots and the ashes further improved the soil (Ball 1880). Subsequently, fertility was improved by bringing litter from the adjoining forests, burning it and mixing the ashes with the soil. However, despite this, the area degraded over time and within ten years cultivators had to move to another spot. The *gora* lands were also used for pasture. The best uplands yielded an annual crop but inferior lands were fit for cultivation only once in four to five years.

The Hos were, in fact, not indigenous to Singhbhum, but are believed to have migrated there from northern Chota Nagpur

sometime between the eighth and twelfth centuries⁸. These techniques of shifting cultivation, it may be argued, had been particularly suited to the needs of a migrating people in an inhospitable, jungle terrain. The colonial government was severely critical of shifting cultivation which it considered to be a wasteful enterprise⁹. Nevertheless, even in the early nineteenth century, given the level of agricultural technology available to the *adivasis*, the plentiful land available and a low population, shifting cultivation was a sustainable economic activity, supplemented as it was by dependence on forest produce. Moreover, contrary to desiccationist beliefs, shifting cultivation did not entail a continuous clearing of new forest areas, but followed a fallowing cycle whereby two years of cropping was followed by twelve to fifteen years of rest (Roy Chaudhury 1958).

FOREST RESTRICTIONS UNDER COLONIAL RULE

British rule significantly affected the livelihood patterns of the Singhbhum Hos, particularly the complementary roles of the forest and settled cultivation in their economy. Prior to the British annexation of Kolhan, villagers normally enjoyed customary access to all forest produce. They could also clear the forest for extension of cultivation with the increase of population and to graze their cattle. These practices were regulated by the *mundas* and the *mankis*, the headman of the village and the *pir* respectively. The precolonial state asserted its right to special control over and taxation or *dalkati* on only certain commercially valuable products of the time such as wild *tussar* cocoons. Nevertheless, neither the forest, nor the trees were considered to be the property of the indigenous kings or their subordinates. Similarly, the precolonial state, while exacting tributes from *adivasi* subjects rarely intervened in agricultural production decisions. This was to change under the British when the government embarked on a policy of direct intervention in local agrarian practices, particularly in its attempts to replace shifting cultivation with settled agriculture. One of the major changes that we may therefore associate with British rule was the separation that it brought about between the forest and settled cultivation.

The alienation of the Hos from the forest gradually occurred in stages following the British occupation of Kolhan in 1837. However, in the early days the colonial administration took little interest in the conservation of Singhbhum's forests and instead sought to consolidate its control over the area by the extension of cultivation. In the 1860s, the government made the first attempts to control Singhbhum's forests and restrict the traditional access to the forest in the interests of preserving its timber. Customary practices, such as tapping *sal* trees for *dhoona* or resin and the system of cotton culture followed by the villagers, were also depicted as being destructive of the forests¹⁰. Dalton, the Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, proposed to place forests under the charge of the *mundas* and *mankis* who were assigned the responsibility of protecting the forests¹¹. This dependence on the traditional leaders was necessitated by the remoteness of Singhbhum's

forests from the major timber marts and the inability of the colonial government to provide for any other agency at the time.

Behind such initiatives was the colonial government's understanding that timber from the Singhbhum forests would become commercially more valuable in the future when the forests near the timber marts were exhausted and when better communications were established with the interior. The commercial intent was, however, masked by public pronouncements of ecological concerns. Dalton thus declared that, 'it is not solely for the sake of timber that the forests should be preserved, it is desirable to afford them protection in consequence of the effect their disappearance is likely to have on the rainfall'¹². Nevertheless, despite such considerations, extension of settled cultivation rather than reserving tracts of forests remained the focus of government policy in the mid nineteenth century. The revenue settlement of 1867 encouraged the reclamation of land for cultivation and Hayes, the Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum, reported that thanks to the 'civilising' influence of the British cultivation had increased and all wastelands near Chaibasa had disappeared.¹³

It was in the last two decades of the nineteenth century that demarcating and reserving portions of the forest for the exclusive use of the government was taken up in earnest. A comprehensive act, the Forest Act VII of 1878, provided for the constitution of reserved forests all over India, effectively closing parts of the forests to the indigenous users. The need to preserve the forest was again motivated by the demand for timber at the time. The advent of railways created an enormously inflated demand for fuel and timber for railway sleepers. In 1885, it was officially estimated that the Singhbhum forests were capable of yielding 5,000 mature trees per annum¹⁴. The opening of the Bengal–Nagpur railway for goods traffic in 1890–1891 and the extension of the Rai Bareilly–Benaras Railway boosted the timber trade. Between 1895 and 1898, altogether 20,921 trees were felled and cut into 807,627 broad-gauge sleepers and the government realised revenue worth rupees 8,50,000 from this source (O' Malley 1910). There was also a growing demand for the timber of these forests in the timber marts of Calcutta where they were used for building purposes. A large quantity also went to the Sunderbans for boat building and the dry poles were exported to the coalfields and to other parts of Bengal and Bihar. Thus while forests became increasingly restricted for the local people, they were commercialised on a massive scale in the interests of enabling sustained timber production.

Besides creating reserved forests, the Forest Act of 1878 also had provisions for creating 'protected forests' if the claims of the users of the reserved forests were proven. On the basis of the Government of India's forest policy issued on 19 October 1894 (Majumdar 1950), India's forests were divided into four groups: reserved forests, protected forests, private forests and village forests and wastes. While in the two latter groups the access for the village communities continued much as before, in the protected forests, and especially in the reserved forests, the right of the local peasants to graze their animals, to cultivate

crops, to fell trees, to collect honey, *mahua*, *kusum* leaves and *sabai* grass came under the strict control of the colonial state. The Forest Department undertook the management of reserved and protected forests, while village forests were administered by the district administration. The village headmen were assigned the responsibility of managing the village forests under the Deputy Commissioner.

To justify the intrusion of colonial forest administration, the government argued that forest laws were designed to secure the best interests of the Hos. Desiccationist ideas, popular among government officials at the time, depicted the Hos as destroyers of their habitat. It was argued that all the villages outside the protected forest would soon be denuded of vegetation, unless immediate preventive measures were taken. It was also stated that the rights of the tenants were merely suspended in their own interests and not completely taken away. Forests had to be protected 'for the interests of the tenants, both of the present and future generations—and in view of this consideration it is equitable to curtail the privileges of the present generation of tenants, provided that no excessive inconvenience is caused to them'¹⁵. The object of restricting access to the forests was ostensibly not to exclude or diminish the rights of the tenants, but to regulate the exercise of their rights and prevent their wanton abuse (O' Malley 1910).

Ideological considerations undoubtedly informed many of the activists of the colonial administrators. Yet other official pronouncements of the colonial government show that ground realities, particularly commercial interests, underlay the justifications of scientific forestry that were propounded for preservation of forests. A district gazetteer for instance, commented, 'Unfortunately, the Kol seems unable to grasp the fact that the forest was made for any purpose other than to be destroyed, and its timber wasted wholesale' (O' Malley, L.S.S. 1910). Thus, traditional forest activities, not being conducted for earning profit, were termed wasteful, while the destruction of large areas of forest for the sake of the timber trade was a commercially profitable venture and hence denoted a gainful utilisation of forest resources. Ideological considerations were also largely modified by pragmatic considerations at the time of implementation of policies. Thus 'ideal methods of conservancy' often had to give way to 'the convenience and even to the prejudices of the people'¹⁶, not to mention that of the government. It was argued that the Hos could not help them in spite of themselves beyond a certain point. 'The measures of conservancy adopted should therefore be of the simplest possible nature; and we should avoid as much as we can worrying the people in matters that are not really essential'¹⁷.

By 1910, the forests of Singhbhum, both reserved and protected, extended over 1,085 square miles or more than one-fourth of the total area of the district. With the introduction of forest laws, access to forests was controlled through regulations and licenses. In place of customary usage, the notion of right-holders in forests was introduced, based on a fine-tuned understanding of which privileges were to be accorded to whom. Categorisation thus took place both of the forest, its uses and its users. Although such categories rarely tended to

be closed or fixed groupings and indeed tended to vary over time according to changing circumstances, this nevertheless involved a vital departure from customary practices. Grazing, for instance, was limited to specific types of animals—grazing of goats and sheep was not encouraged as they damaged the jungle—and to particular days of the week and to particular forests¹⁸. Permits came to be issued to recorded *raiyats* for taking minor forest produce free of charge, such as jungle fruit, *mahua*, thatching grass. However, for products such as lac and *tussar*, the government, as landlord, claimed *dalkati*. *Sabai* grass was governed by special rules even in village jungles as the Forest Department leased out licenses to paper manufacturers.

In 1895, the Conservator of Forests issued licenses to each village headman for hunting, shooting, fishing or trapping animals in reserved and protected forests of Chota Nagpur. The headman was required to himself obey and make the villagers obey the conditions of the licence. A system of reward and punishment ensured that the government's orders were carried out. Thus, licenses of the entire village could be withdrawn if any inhabitant contravened any provision of the Forest Law¹⁹. The Forest Act laid down several activities (many of which were in any case alien concepts in the Chota Nagpur region), which were inimical to the interests of conservation. The poisoning of rivers or other waters, the killing of fish by any explosive, the damming and baling of water and the use of small nets to catch fish were therefore officially prohibited²⁰. The Hos were given the option to appeal to the Conservator of Forests or to the Divisional Commissioner in case they were refused licenses. However, the Conservator, with the approval of the Commissioner of the Division, had the authority to cancel any license granted under these rules for shooting in a forest and the offenders punished under the forest laws. Since forest products had gained in market value, the government also introduced new restrictions regarding the categories of people who could have access to them and to limit the number of people who could use the forest. Villages not contiguous to reserved forests had to pay an annual fee for the removal of forest products. Elaborate measures were undertaken to distinguish between villagers who had the right to utilise forest products and those who did not²¹.

With the demand for timber reaching a peak for supplying the Bengal–Nagpur Railway, the Commissioner gave the Forest Department permission to fell the trees for sleepers on government lands outside the reserved forests in Singhbhum. The permits were issued at exactly the same rates as those in force for the reserved forests, but they had to be presented by the holder to the head of the village who took them back after expiry of the time allowed and when the forest produce had been removed. While making facilities for the contractors to obtain fuel from unreserved forests, the Deputy Commissioner wanted that they should use the reserved areas rather than the village forests. He therefore ordered that those who obtained permits to remove produce from village forests should pay an extra fee or *dalkati* of one *anna* per rupee to the *munda* of the village in which the forest was situated. Of this, six *pies* in the

rupee were to be paid by the *munda* to the *manki* of his *pir*. Thus the co-operation of the *mankis* and *mundas* was obtained to see that only permit holders were allowed to remove any produce from the village forests and only the trees selected and marked by the forester for cutting were actually cut²². It was the duty of the Officers of the Forest Department to issue the permits and realise the amounts payable for timber, bamboo, grass, and so on, and they had to see to the marking of the trees that could be felled and to point out the locality in which the forest produce could be cut. It was specially proposed to guard against any trees being cut near villages or cultivation and all fruit trees that were useful to the people of the place. Moreover, as most of the permit holders were likely to be strangers from outside Kolhan, who were working as contractors for the railway, and did not know where the forests were, it was deemed necessary to employ ten extra guards to accompany the permit holders and foresters to point out the trees to be cut²³.

The rules regarding grazing rights and permits for removal of forest products were particularly irksome for the Hos who had been accustomed to unlimited access to the forest. At a conference in Chaibasa in 1914, the leading *mankis* and *mundas* met the Deputy Commissioner and demanded that protected forests be put in their charge. They presented a petition which stated that they should again be allowed to take timber from the protected forest without permission. They also claimed the right to graze sheep and goats in the protected forests.²⁴ In 1924, the imposition of new rules of the Forest Department to regulate the grazing of village cattle within the government protected forests created unrest among the Hos. There were widespread complaints from tenants of Kolhan Government Estate and large crowds demonstrated before the Deputy Commissioner in Chaibasa. Rather than large-scale protest movements, however, the grievances of the people were translated into silent disregard of the forest rules and protests remained confined to individual acts of defiance. The Forest Department reported a number of cases every year of arson, poaching, illegal removal of firewood, illegal grazing, avoidance of *begar* and non-payment of wood cess and other forest fees.

Another change associated with colonial rule was that outsiders, only partially linked with the Forest Department, gradually came to control the forest-based economy of the Hos. Outsiders' presence in the forest was not a new thing and the forests had not been closed to the outside world during precolonial times. Their presence earlier was connected with the subsistence needs of the forest communities. It was through these traders that the forest dwellers exchanged their products for necessities which were not locally available²⁵. However, under colonial rule the role of the outsiders also changed. Initially connected with the state's needs, their role over the years became largely autonomous of the state's control. Numerous outsiders arrived as contractors for the timber supply. So did timber traders who provided part of the supply to the contractors. Another group of outsiders consisted of the employees of the Forest Department, people connected with public works (such as road construction) and the supply of the

Department's necessities such as food and labour. Outsiders also came to control the trade in minor forest produce, that is, produce other than timber, with the increasing state control over the forest. In Singhbhum, the major cause of destruction of jungles in the nineteenth century was the sale or lease of forests to timber suppliers, all private agencies.

Although the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 prohibited transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals, the state could secure access to village lands on the grounds that industrial development would serve a public purpose. Between 1915 and 1925, 100,000 acres of tribal land was used to open up mines, develop housing facilities and for construction of roads and rail tracks. Such land transfers were rarely equitable for the Hos. Monetary compensation, when granted was rarely adequate, and the Hos, unused to a money economy, would fritter away the compensation they received and thereby sink into landlessness. Monopoly leases to companies like Balmer Lawrie for removal of *sabai* grass created great hardship for the Hos. As a result, cottage industries such as string making, and so on, came to a standstill. Thus at a later stage it was the private interest groups rather than the government who came to cause hardship to the Hos in the forests.

Restriction to the use of forests also affected the traditional agricultural practices of the Hos. Access to the uplands also became restricted thanks to the forest laws which put large areas of the *gora* out of reach of the ordinary cultivators. When the protected forests were formed, the *raiya*s were induced to relinquish any plots of *gora* lands that lay within the forest, but many would not give up the rice lands. They were allowed to retain them on condition that cultivation was not to be extended. Nevertheless, a certain amount of surreptitious extension of cultivation continued to take place.

With restrictions placed on access to forests, the sentiments of reverence for the sacred grove, weakened in Ho villages in the later years of colonial rule. In his 'Note on the Hos', D.M. Panna, the Kolhan Inspector observed frequent fellings in the sacred groves in the early years of the twentieth century (Tuckey 1920). Trees were secretly felled, though not necessarily for the purpose of clearing lands for cultivation. In precolonial Singhbhum there had been a wide variety of people dependent on the forest. Both the village and the state used its resources, yet the use of the forest resources was limited by sociocultural and economic norms of the times. The village system being essentially non-competitive and subsistence-oriented, there was no competitive sharing of forest resources. To the colonial state, on the other hand, the forest resource had a commodity value and therefore had to be utilised for profit. They therefore had very different requirements and understanding of the forest, bringing about massive changes in the lives of *adivasis*.

EXTENSION OF THE ARABLE FRONTIER UNDER COLONIAL RULE

A notable change associated with colonial rule in Singhbhum was the large expansion in cultivation. The area of rice lands

under cultivation increased from 82,427 acres in 1867 to 1,94,738.9 acres in 1897 (Craven 1898). Of this, the total increase in the *bera* and *bad* lands was estimated at 136.3%, while the gross increase, including the uplands came to 307.3%. Thus it was found that the area under *bera* and *bad* cultivation had doubled since the settlement of 1867. In all probability, this huge increase was partly due to serious under-enumeration in 1867 and over-enumeration in 1897. Between 1897 and 1920, when a revisional survey was held, it was found that there was a further increase of 29% in the area under cultivation. It was estimated that rice lands had increased by 13.6% and uplands by 50%. The Settlement Officer, Tuckey, ascribed this to the undercounting of uplands and over-enumeration of rice lands in 1897. He argued that the 1897 settlement report had underestimated the total area of the estate by 36 square miles and also that a considerable area of upland had escaped survey and assessment. It was thus concluded that the actual increase in rice land was greater than 13.6% while the increase of upland was much less than 50% (Tuckey 1920). Nevertheless, even making allowances for errors in computation, the massive extension of cultivation during the period becomes very apparent.

The reasons behind this massive increase in cultivation were many. The British government explained it partly in terms of greater sedentarisation of the Hos with the establishment of British rule and partly in terms of its 'civilising' influence. The other causes that the government highlighted included the creation of large forest reserves by the Government Forest Department, the protection of unreserved forests by the Deputy Commissioner, the construction of a railway through the district, the influx of a large number of outsiders into the district and no less importantly, the spread of primary education. The latter, it was argued, also had a 'civilising' effect and had helped to transform a 'wild and ignorant race' into a 'peaceable, industrious people'²⁶. The railways opened the door to export and the cultivators in Kolhan, encouraged by the new demand, found an incentive to cultivate carefully and to increase the area of their cultivation.²⁷ Colonial authorities had increasingly discouraged the practice of shifting cultivation even before the promulgation of the Forest Acts of the late nineteenth century as they considered it to be an inconstant process that was inimical to establishing its centralised control over the agrarian population. The reservation of 523 square miles of forests in the Kolhan by 1894 and the protection of unreserved forests, according to the British officers, had the effect of checking the nomadic habits of the Hos, binding them to the limits of their villages. As a result, they argued, more labour and care was bestowed in the cultivation of their lands and unforested cultivable wastes, which had been hitherto neglected. Moreover, forest-covered lands were also grabbed and brought under cultivation, resulting in an enormous additional area being brought under cultivation²⁸.

However, more than the protection of forests, the real reason of the massive increase in cultivation could be ascribed to the rise in population. In the twenty-four years between 1867 and 1891, there had been an enormous increase in both the

population of Hos and non-Hos. The 1891 census showed that the population of the Kolhan was 248,638 of whom 180,168 or 72.3% were Hos. However, in 1867 the population had stood at 118,281 of whom 93,968 or nearly 80% were Hos²⁹. Thus, while the Ho population had doubled, that of the non-Hos had nearly tripled. A large part of the increase in the non-Ho population was due to immigration from the Tributary States of Orissa and out of a population of 68,470 non-Hos in 1897, no less than 45,667 were Oriyas who helped clear the dense jungles for cultivation. British administrators also considered them to be better cultivators, particularly the Oriya *goalas*³⁰. Their example also helped to introduce superior techniques among the Hos. Besides Oriyas, non-tribal people from Hazaribagh and Chota Nagpur also flocked into the Kolhan as labourers on the railway tracks and in connection with the trade in sleepers and *sabai* grass. Later they settled down with their families as cultivators in the villages near the line (Craven 1898). The district administration also alleged that some of the outsiders gained entry through the connivance of the traditional village leaders, the *mankis* and the *mundas*, who had settled deserted holdings with them. They also permitted outsiders to clear wastelands³¹, although the right of reclaiming wastelands was vested in the resident cultivating *raiyyats*. This had the tacit approval of the district authorities who considered that the outsider cultivators were more energetic than the Hos in reclaiming wastelands³².

The local administration discounted the theory that land was passing out of the hands of the Hos and argued that the government could keep the increase in the number of outsider population under control since the number of outsiders who had settled in the estate between 1897 and 1918 was only 3,334 of whom 2,456 were non-agriculturists. It was further argued that most of the latter had settled in villages solely populated by non-Hos. The number who settled in Ho villages was less than 1,000³³. Yet, government regulations were scarcely sufficient to check the steady inroads of outsiders into Kolhan.

The extension of the agrarian frontier was moreover accomplished both through the reclamation of new land as well as through the cultivation of wastelands. A process of intensification of cultivation also occurred through the increase of *korkar*³⁴, that is, the conversion of uplands into rice lands. As Mohapatra had argued, this was a process that had been going on throughout Chota Nagpur (Mohapatra 1991). With the increase of population, much more of the upland, that is, the *gora* land, was embanked into the second quality rice land or *bad*. The exact percentage of increase is not easy to gauge because of the different parameters adopted for measuring acreage in the successive settlements, but it is clear that a steady conversion of the *gora* lands into *bad* occurred throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The *korkar* lands thus created were exclusively utilised for rice cultivation. In areas where there was a high percentage of rice land, most of the rice was cultivated in the *bad* lands. Most of the available *bera* land was made fairly early in the development of any tract, then the upland was extended, and at a much later stage that upland was gradually turned into *bad*.

Although *gora* or the upland had increased more than rice land since 1897, the general development of the estate pointed to an extension of *bad* made from *gora* (Tuckey 1920). Upgrading of the *gora* lands had its dangers especially during years of sparse rainfall. The crop on *bera* land was almost immune from complete failure to drought; on the contrary, the *bad* lands were entirely rain-dependent. Thus rice cultivation was extended to lands which, without adequate irrigation facilities, were better suited to the growth of upland crops. Areas which had a high percentage of inferior embanked rice land, which were not protected by natural or artificial irrigation became particularly prone to famines when the rainfall was insufficient or badly distributed. These included Chainpur, Ajodhya, Asantalia, Lota, Charai, Thai, Bharbharia and Lagra *pirs*, where the cultivated area consisted of over 70% of *bad* lands and Chiru and Gumra, where *bad* constituted 66% of the cultivated area.

These changes in land utilisation were accompanied by changes in the cropping pattern as well. By the end of the nineteenth century, rice had become by far the most important food crop in Kolhan and the net cropped area under rice was more than four times that of all the other food crops combined. Of the total rice crop, the percentages of *bera*, *bad* and *gora* rice in 1918 were 32, 57 and 11, respectively. Taking the outturn of these three crops into consideration, the *bera* crop had come to represent about 43% of the rice, the *bad* crop 51% and the *gora* crop 6% (Tuckey 1920). The percentage of rice land in West Singhbhum was not nearly as high as in East Singhbhum where it amounted to 69%, but much higher than in other parts of Chota Nagpur. The percentage of rice land was highest in the fully cultivated *pirs* of the north and east, lower in the south and lowest in the jungle *pirs*. In the most highly developed villages, where most of the good uplands had been terraced and converted into rice land, the proportion of inferior rice lands yielding a precarious crop was naturally highest and it was such villages that suffered most in the years of scarce rainfall and famines as during 1915–1916 and 1916–1917. The jungle villages, where only the best lands had been terraced were least affected by drought (Tuckey 1920). Thus, this increased dependence on a single crop made the agrarian economy more vulnerable to crop failure.

The increase in the extent of cultivation and the intensification of the process of cultivation was not, however, backed up by new irrigation projects which had become essential in view of the tendency to convert the uplands into rice lands. Under British rule there was little investment in irrigation on part of the government, although successive settlements emphasised its necessity. The 'land improvement' loans that it provided were normally negligible. The construction of tanks and embankments was an expensive proposition and Ho peasants lacked the capital for the purpose. Nevertheless, irrigation was left to the initiative of the villagers and the tenants, who had to expend large amounts of labour and capital on the construction of these irrigation reservoirs. In 1897, it was found that out of 943 reservoirs, no less than 661 or over 70% had been constructed by the peasants and only 78 or 8.2% by the government³⁵. Thus, towards the end of the nineteenth

century we find that irrigation facilities, essential for sustaining the increased rice production, remained short of the actual necessity. Agriculture in many areas continued to be rain-dependent, which made for a precarious situation in view of a sharply rising population. The full benefits of the extension of agriculture, therefore, remained restricted in view of the difficulties of cultivation and the want of irrigation.

Agricultural production in Kolhan also remained uncertain under colonial rule and the region became prone to famines whenever the rains failed. Even a partial failure of rainfall affected agricultural conditions, while rainfall deficiency spread over a few successive years led to acute distress due to the failure of crops. Together with this, another factor behind frequent famines was the growing dependence on the rice crop. The fact that a larger population had come to depend on agriculture, and was therefore exposed to drought and famine, further deepened their impact. North Kolhan was undoubtedly the area most liable to scarcity and distress owing to failure of rains since it contained a high percentage of *bad* land and the people depended almost entirely on the autumn paddy crop. In southern Kolhan, the soil was better and the people harvested larger crops of autumn cereals and winter oilseeds from the uplands. The forest areas were also less liable to famine for several reasons. In the first place, as mentioned above, owing to the large forest area the rainfall was heavier than in the more open parts. Secondly, there was a high percentage of *bera* or low-lying paddy lands, which benefited by drainage from the hills. Thirdly, the forests gave the inhabitants a food supply on which they could fall back on years of scarcity, and also provided them with work such as timber-cutting, *sabai* cutting, and so on. The mines of the Bengal Iron and Steel Company at Duia also provided employment to the residents of neighbouring and distant villages³⁶.

Between 1866 and 1918, there were five major occurrences of distress and famine conditions in Kolhan. Scarcity told most upon the class of people who were day labourers. While a cultivator in all probability could stand out two or three bad seasons, the 'exchange entitlement'³⁷ (Sen 1981) of the labourers was far less. Labourers normally felt the effects of a bad season at once and their distress began with the first sign of a failure of the harvest. It was therefore suggested that men of this class should be the first recipients of help, but relief should be provided in exchange of labour. Moreover, it was argued, the wealthy members of the community should be called upon to contribute to relief measures.

Scarcity at times was also created by the large export of grain from the district. The grain trade was entirely carried on by non-resident outsider traders who came to Singhbhum during the cold weather. There was also a local system of grain dealing to re-import and re-distribute grain to the people. The local officers pointed out that Singhbhum, even in its worst years, produced enough grain to support its population. However, since the opening of the Bengal–Nagpur Railway in 1899, numerous merchants—Kutchi, Marwari and Bengali—set up large godowns at Chakulia, which was only 113 miles from Calcutta. In the winters they sent their agents into the

interior to buy rice at the local market and export it all to Calcutta. Subsequently, they closed their business. In a bad year, although the export was smaller in quantity, it was more profitable since the smaller cultivators, unaware of the extent of rise in prices sold readily at a little above normal prices until they had depleted their stocks. Finally, paddy would be sold in the local *hats* at a price which only the outsider dealers could afford to give. However, these dealers could not make any profit out of re-importing grain into the *mofussil* during the monsoon. In Singhbhum district it was difficult for the grain traders in the locality to arrange for any distribution of grain in the interior since they lacked local knowledge. Moreover, because of restrictions on mortgaging the land of the *adivasi* people the grain traders were unwilling to advance grain even for a month or two on the security of the standing crop. There were few local grain dealers who kept large stocks and there was no machinery for keeping the cultivator provided with food when the stocks were depleted. Although the bigger cultivators kept a sufficient stock for their own use they were understandably unwilling to part with this on any terms to their poorer brethren.

The years 1915–1918 again witnessed a widespread and major scarcity in the Kolhan Government Estate which affected the northern part of Kolhan as well as the forested south and south west. Northern Kolhan was particularly vulnerable to scarcity and distress owing to the failure of rains since the area had a high percentage of *bad* lands and the people depended entirely on the autumn paddy crop. The condition of the people of Kolhan at that time was far from satisfactory. Few had stocks of paddy in their houses, they could not procure loans from their more fortunate neighbours, nor could they find any work in the fields. The local trade was carried on by outsider merchants who visited the weekly *hats*. But for villages situated among the hills and forests, particularly in Saranda *pir*, these *hats* were practically inaccessible. Although attempts were made by the local authorities to import rice into the district, the prices had risen high, especially as the neighbouring states of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar had prohibited the export of rice.

AGRARIAN CRISIS AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW PASTURES

The fallout of the agrarian crisis, compounded with restricted access to forest was emigration, particularly to the tea gardens of Assam, a trend that became noticeable towards the end of the nineteenth century. Migration was not a new phenomenon for the different peoples and communities who lived in Chota Nagpur. Most of the *adivasis* of Chota Nagpur had a history of migration. In fact, the Hos themselves were not indigenous to Kolhan, but had migrated there from the north-western part of Chota Nagpur, displacing the previous settlers and consequently colonizing the region. The upheavals of the early colonial period had also resulted in migration of *adivasi* people such as that of the Santals from Hazaribagh to the Damin-i-Koh in the Santal Parganas, a process which started in the early nineteenth century. There was also considerable seasonal

migration of the Dhangars³⁸ of Chota Nagpur to the Bengal districts during the winter months as early as 1827 where they found employment in the indigo factories, in the winter harvesting of the rice crop in Bengal and in the conservancy works in Calcutta (Hunter 1886).

In course of the nineteenth century, however, the nature of migration changed and the hired labourer and seasonal farmhand were rapidly transformed into part of the international labour force. The ending of the global slave trade witnessed scarcity of labour in the island colonies of Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad and even Australia which was replenished through hiring indentured labour from India during the 1840s and 1850s. The Chota Nagpur *adivasis* came to form a sizeable proportion of those taken overseas under indenture³⁹. From the 1850s, however, their proportion began to dwindle and by the end of the nineteenth century Chota Nagpur *adivasis* were no longer systematically recruited for the sugar colonies⁴⁰. At about the same time, during the 1860s, a new demand for tribal labour appeared from an alternative source—the tea industry in Assam and in the Duars on the Bengal-Bhutan border. Chota Nagpur was soon overrun with coolie recruiters whose employers were willing to make payments of Rs. 70 to Rs. 90 per head (Tinker 1974). Between 1870 and 1900 approximately 700,000 to 750,000 recruits for the tea industry went to Assam, of whom about 250,000 were from Chota Nagpur (Tinker 1974).

Despite the social and communal restrictions against mobility and the pressure to stay within the structure of the village community rather than to migrate, the push factors or the economic compulsions were an inducement for the Hos to migrate from Kolhan. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, a period of considerable extension of cultivation, emigration from Kolhan had not been large (Dalton 1972). Even during the last decades of the nineteenth century emigrants registered under Act I of 1882 remained very low, although larger numbers emigrated under the ‘free emigration’ system, which was not registered. The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum estimated the latter at 254 in 1888–1889 against 385 in 1889–1890⁴¹. In contrast, the number of registered emigrants from Singhbhum was 68 in 1887–1888, 33 in 1888–1889 and 98 in 1889–1890⁴². However, reliable figures regarding the number of coolies recruited in Kolhan could not be obtained as most of the coolies were taken by the recruiters directly to Purulia and Dhubri to be put on contract, without passing them through any registered depot⁴³. The figures furnished by the so-called ‘free’ emigrant agents were unreliable, as the majority of them are said to be men of ‘indifferent character’, and were anxious to keep their proceedings from the knowledge of the authorities⁴⁴. The opening of the Bengal–Nagpur Railway changed the recruiting grounds and the centres from which coolies were dispatched. Having partially exhausted the districts of Chota Nagpur, a fresh supply of coolies was located in the Central Provinces and in the Chota Nagpur Tributary States⁴⁵. Several coolies, recruited from the Political States, who passed through Chaibasa depots, were returned as recruited from

the Singhbhum district, thereby conflating the figure for Singhbhum. Nevertheless, census reports show that there was a steady emigration from Kolhan since the early years of the twentieth century. In 1901, Kolhan sent out more emigrants than other parts of Singhbhum⁴⁶. In 1915–1916 at least 10,000 coolies were recruited from Kolhan for Assam⁴⁷.

Detlef Schewerin has emphasised the role of the institutional factors within Chota Nagpur to explain emigration from the region during the last decades of the nineteenth century (Schewerin 1978). According to Schewerin, the rise of landlordism in Chota Nagpur under British rule went against the prevailing custom of communal ownership in tribal organisation and to general indebtedness of the *adivasi* peasantry, the usurpation of their lands by the landlords and increasing insecurity of their tenancies. In these circumstances, there was little agricultural expansion in Chota Nagpur Division in the nineteenth century. He further states that the process by which the *adivasi* peasantry converted low yielding uplands into higher yielding rice lands was impeded and the per capita availability of food grains declined, leading to their exodus from Chota Nagpur.

However, local conditions in Chota Nagpur varied considerably and the charge of high landlordism does not apply to Kolhan Government Estate in West Singhbhum, which had been wrested from the traditional ruling class and converted into a Government Estate under the direct control of the British. In fact, as argued above, in Kolhan Government Estate, considerable extension of cultivation took place between 1867 and 1918. However, despite the increase in acreage, there was little advancement in agricultural techniques and agriculture continued to remain rain-dependent in Kolhan. Land improvement also had its pitfalls, as the development of irrigation facilities did not keep pace with the demand. The growth of population in Kolhan led to the growth of *korkar* lands, that is, upgrading the uplands into *bad* or second quality rice lands, and this increased the need for irrigation. Failure of the monsoon rains and the consequent poor harvest led to agrarian crises, which acted as a motivating factor in seeking emigration. Droughts and famines were increasingly frequent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the disastrous harvest failure of 1916–1918. In the conditions of distress and famine, *adivasi* cultivators could not get access to credit from outsiders. The status of the latter in Kolhan had, in any case, become precarious in view of various tenancy laws culminating in the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which restricted the transfer of tribal lands to outsiders.

Although in normal years Hos were averse to leaving their homes, famine situations and crop failures induced them to look for employment elsewhere. An increase in the number of emigrants was thus considered by the district authorities to be a sure sign of distress. Thus, during the months of January to August 1916, the average number of emigrants from the district was over 1,200 per month, whereas in the previous year, the average had been less than 150⁴⁸. Thus far as the administration was concerned, emigration was a useful form of famine relief. There was only one objection to it; the fact

that occasionally an able bodied labourer emigrated leaving his dependents behind to swell the number of recipients of gratuitous relief. Such cases were, however, exceptions, generally whole families emigrated⁴⁹.

CONCLUSION

In Singhbhum, as in other parts of Chota Nagpur, the most significant change associated with the colonial period was the expansion of settled cultivation, in the late nineteenth century. This constituted one of the methods in which the early colonial administration sought to consolidate its control over the tribal people of the region. Extension of cultivation served the dual purpose of ‘civilising’ both the countryside and the ‘savage’ through sedentarisation and control of their volatility. Yet, agrarian change in Singhbhum did not lead to any tangible benefits nor did it indicate stability of livelihood or agrarian development so far as the bulk of the *adivasi* population was concerned. In precolonial times, agriculture and dependence on forests had complemented one another. The increase of cultivation together with restricting access to forests which occurred under colonial rule had an adverse effect on a large section of the Hos in Kolhan. As their access to the forests became restricted, it made them all the more dependent on settled agriculture. Uplands, where age-old, slash-and-burn methods used for growing hardy crops were converted into settled rice lands. The increasing dependence on rice made the Hos more vulnerable to famine and scarcity. The colonial government laid the responsibility of such improvement on the *adivasis* and was content to denigrate them as being ‘improvident and lazy’ and not amenable to change. Agriculture, however, continued to remain dependent on rainfall. There were few irrigation projects to counteract the uncertainty of rain. Thus the agrarian economy remained fragile and liable to famine and scarcity. The problem was accentuated by the action of the outsider traders in creating an artificial shortage by exporting most of the produce outside to Calcutta and other urban centres. In such circumstances, migration to Assam in search for a new livelihood was an option taken up by some. Nevertheless, migration remained the last option for most of the Hos who preferred to remain bound to their land rather than seek their fortunes abroad.

Notes

1. The notable exceptions to this include Washbrook 1978.
2. Singhbhum district is located in the south-eastern part of the Chota Nagpur plateau. In the nineteenth century, it had formed part of the Chota Nagpur Division of the Bengal Presidency. Today Singhbhum lies in the newly constituted Indian state of Jharkhand.
3. Grove (1995: 386), for instance argues that the non-arable environment in the pre-colonial era was ‘far from being a paradise of so-called common property’.
4. Even in the famine that hit Kolhan in 1913–1918, the mortality rate was far less than elsewhere in North India as the *adivasis* in Kolhan supplemented their scanty food supply with food collected from forests. The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum observed that several parts of the Singhbhum forests came to resemble ‘rabbit warrens’ as a result

- of the people digging up tuberous roots, 'Annual Progress Report on Forest Administration for 1918–19'. Government of Bihar and Orissa (hereafter GB&O). Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 3–11, September 1920, West Bengal State Archives (hereafter WBSA).
5. Bandyopadhyay (2001: 146–148) identifies four such concepts, namely, *mahavana* (deep forest), *srivana* (village forest), *panchavati* (the sacred grove) and the *brajamandala* (a series of culturally significant gardens), which though not valid for all Indian societies for all historical periods, nevertheless remain significant as cultural concepts.
 6. The transition to settled agriculture, according to Singh (1985: 65), was facilitated by the use of iron implements and the plough. These had transformed the tribal groups in Chota Nagpur into settled peasant communities. He further argued that this process may have been aided by the imitation of the agricultural practices of peasant communities such as Bhogtas, Kurmis, Ahirs and Koeris who had migrated into the region.
 7. *Pirs* were administrative divisions, usually consisting of ten to twelve villages.
 8. Roy (1995: 79) argued that the fact that the Hos retained no memories about the rise of the Nagbansi Raj in Chota Nagpur between the eighth and twelfth centuries indicates that they must have broken off from the Mundas and migrated southwards before the kings of Chota Nagpur obtained power. Hos themselves do not appear to have retained any traditions of origin or migration that throw light on their history. While Oraon folklore claims that the exodus of the Hos was caused by their invasions, Tickell (1840: 695) had suggested that this migration was probably an attempt to escape the tax regime imposed by the rising state systems of Hinduised groups in Chota Nagpur and its accompanying extortion.
 9. Contrary to the general view of swidden agriculture as a wasteful mode of cultivation, Geertz (1963: 15–16), following the 'ecological approach in anthropology', has argued that this system of cultivation had its positive attributes as well. He writes, 'In ecological terms, the most distinctive positive characteristic of swidden agriculture (and the characteristic most in contrast to wet-rice agriculture) is that it is integrated into, and when genuinely adaptive, maintains the general structure of the pre-existing natural ecosystem into which it is projected, rather than creating and sustaining one organised along novel lines and displaying novel dynamics'.
 10. Cotton cultivation entailed clearing forests by girdling large trees and burning them in certain patches of the forest. The area thus cleared was cultivated for two or three years and then abandoned.
 11. Dalton to Board of Revenue, 3 August 1867. Government of Bengal (hereafter GOB), Revenue Proceedings, No. 9, September 1867, WBSA.
 12. Dalton to Board of Revenue, 3 August 1867. GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 9, September 1867, WBSA.
 13. W.H. Hayes to Commissioner, Chota Nagpur Division (hereafter CND), 22 February 1867, p. 128, GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 122, June 1867, WBSA.
 14. This estimate was later reduced to 3,000 trees by the Conservator of Forests, 'Annual Progress Report on Forest Administration for Bengal, 1892-93'. GOB, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 9–10, January 1894, WBSA.
 15. Hallett, Deputy Commissioner, Singhbhum, to the Commissioner of CND, 26 July 1916, GB&O, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, No. 4, A- Enclosure (1), April 1917, Bihar State Archives (hereafter BSA).
 16. GBO, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, No. 18, January 1915, Enclosure 1, BSA.
 17. GBO, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, No. 18, January 1915, Enclosure 1, BSA.
 18. J.E. Scott, Deputy Commissioner, Singhbhum, to Commissioner, CND, 12 February 1924, GB&O, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, No. 1A, Enclosure 1, September 1924, BSA.
 19. 'Rules to Regulate Hunting, Shooting, Fishing etc. in the Protected Forests of Khurda, Chota Nagpur and Sonthal Parganas', GOB, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 576–578, February 1895, WBSA.
 20. 'Rules to Regulate Hunting, Shooting, Fishing etc. in the Protected Forests of Khurda, Chota Nagpur and Sonthal Parganas', GOB, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 576–578, February 1895, WBSA.
 21. B. Cartier to Commissioner, CND, GOB, R Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 47–48 February 1895, WBSA.
 22. Samuells, Deputy to the Commissioner, CND, 31 January 1889, GOB, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 23–32, September 1890, WBSA.
 23. Samuells, Deputy to the Commissioner, CND, 31 January 1889, GOB, Revenue (Forest) Proceedings, Nos. 23–32, September 1890, WBSA.
 24. 'Note of Statements of *Mankis* and *Mundas* on the Second Day of the Conference', 9th July 1914, GB&O, Revenue Proceedings, No. 6, D – Enclosure 4, March 1915, BSA.
 25. This dependence was common to other forest dwelling communities. For instance, Arnold (1982: 9) has shown that in the Gudem-Rampa Hill Tracts near the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh forest people tied to shifting cultivation mostly depended for their necessities on migrant traders who passed through the hills on their way from the coast to Bastar and the Deccan. Nandini Sundar's study of the Bastar in the Central Provinces shows that itinerant traders, known as the *banjara* controlled the trade in non-timber produce. Sundar 1991: 110–112.
 26. Renny, Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum to Commissioner, CND, 25 July 1893, GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 13, July 1894, WBSA.
 27. Renny, Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum to Commissioner, CND, 25 July 1893, GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 13, July 1894, WBSA.
 28. Renny, Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum to Commissioner, CND, 25 July 1893, GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 13, July 1894, WBSA.
 29. Renny, Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum to Commissioner, CND, 25 July 1893, GOB, Revenue Proceedings, No. 13, July 1894, WBSA.
 30. *Goalas* or cowherds formed a service caste group.
 31. A. Forbes, Commissioner, CND to the Secretary, Board of Revenue, 29–30 November 1897, in Craven 1898.
 32. A. Forbes, Commissioner, CND to the Secretary, Board of Revenue, 29–30 November 1897, in Craven 1898.
 33. P.W. Murphy to the Secretary, Board of Revenue, 31 May 1920, in Tuckey (1920: 5).
 34. The term *korkar* is derived from the Munda saying *Korkar bae kaede* (I have dug up the land by using an axe).
 35. A. Forbes, Commissioner, CND, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, 29–30 November 1897, in Craven 1898: 1.
 36. *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Famines in Bengal and Orissa in 1866*. Pp. 275–276. Vol. 1. Calcutta: Government Press, 1867.
 37. Recently Chakrabarti (2004: 469–473) has assessed the 1896–1897 famine in Bengal and has concluded that it needs to be understood both in terms of 'food availability crisis' and 'failure of exchange entitlement'.
 38. The Dhangars were people of Chota Nagpur who hired out their labour and usually came from the Santal, Munda and Oraon tribes.
 39. Ghosh (1999: 19–20) argues that the reason advanced for this preference was their 'lack of caste' because of which they had few taboos regarding food or work. Moreover, they were perceived to be an undemanding labour force, satisfied with very little material necessities, and 'were more docile and worked harder' than the coolies from other parts of India and Africa. Thus planter capitalism led to the creation of the stereotype of the tractable Dhangars, who were better than the Africans, if not in strength, certainly in docility and in meeting the demands of plantation discipline. Paradoxically, this was at variance with the perceptions that the Chota Nagpur district administration had of the local tribal communities who were invariably castigated for being improvident, lazy and disinclined to work.
 40. The decline could be attributed to their high mortality rate in the coolie depots of Calcutta and on board the emigrant ships, which sometimes witnessed the loss of as much as a quarter or a third of the

cargo of coolies. The loss thus incurred made the hiring of Dhangars commercially non-viable and permission to migrate was increasingly being refused by the medical inspectors.

41. *Annual General Administration Report*, 1889-1890, CND, p. 9.
42. *Annual General Administration Report*, 1889-1890, CND, p. 9.
43. Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum to Commissioner, CND, 31 December 1899 GOB, Revenue (Agriculture) Proceedings, No. 29, January 1900.
44. *Annual General Administration Report*, 1888-1889, CND, p. 8.
45. *Annual General Administration Report*, 1893-1894, CND, p. 16.
46. *Report on the Census of Bengal*, 1901, p. 107.
47. D.M. Panna, 'Note on the Hos,' appendix in Tuckey 1920: 121.
48. 'Final Report on Famine Relief Operations in the district of Singhbhum', Section X, GB&O, Revenue (Agriculture) Proceedings No. 1, July 1917.
49. 'Final Report on Famine Relief Operations in the district of Singhbhum', Section X, GB&O, Revenue (Agriculture) Proceedings No. 1, July 1917.

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