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Being Hungry, Becoming Free: Marginality, Identity and
Livelihoods in Rural Western Orissa

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Anthropology

2012

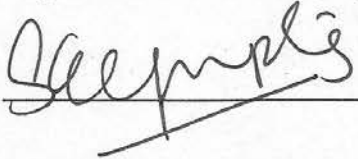
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Abstract

This thesis is a description of lives from a remote area of India. It is based in a village and its neighbourhood, in a place called Borasambar in western Orissa. Here, in the not so distant past there existed a network of interconnected kingdoms, stretching outwards from the valleys of the Mahanadi River into the dense forests of Central India. People who live in these rural, erstwhile forest areas suffered great poverty and deprivation after a brief period of agrarian expansion and prosperity in the late nineteenth century and before state welfare expenditure arrived to provide a new perspective towards poverty. This thesis looks at the structural roots of poverty and tries to trace historically, its changing definitions, manifestations and consequences. The attempt is to understand the phenomenon from the accounts, memories and representations of village people, as they increasingly describe wellbeing through the physical and metaphoric distance from their forest dwelling pasts.

Transcending the objective-subjective divide in poverty research, this thesis aims to analyze poverty, as a social and economic reality that needs to be understood in terms of the meanings it has to the people concerned and as an effect of objective mechanisms and structural conditions. Drawing insight from Bourdieu's social theory of practice and symbolic power, this thesis demonstrates how cultural discourses of poverty are social and historical knowledge sustained by the continuous making and remaking of the relations of dominance and dependence in the local society, while experienced poverty emerges through the effects of broader processes within which the local society has taken shape and remains embedded.

The main contribution of this thesis is towards a historical-anthropology that provides understanding of processes and mechanisms through which power and agency constitute social memories and perpetuate subordination in long-term conditions of poverty. Based on detailed ethnographic fieldwork of a village and archival research guided by recollections and family stories, this thesis traces changing patterns of living conditions of rural people through the social trajectories of a forest dwelling group, the Binjhals, beginning with the political and economic changes associated with the establishment of British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century.

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Chapter 1: Conceptions, Experiences and Conditions of Poverty in Rural Western Orissa¹

1.1 Introduction

'No, I don't think we are poor, since no one likes to think that way or say it about themselves, but we are nevertheless aren't we? When you are in trouble you know you are poor because no one helps you or lends you money. And we are poor because we are so many brothers, where is the land for all of us – the old men sold much of land just to eat; there was nothing left for us. Still, this poverty that you can see is nothing compared to what our budas (ancestors-old people) faced. They ate leem phul (flower of the neem) and peepal sag (leaves of the peepal tree). Who had seen rice? My father was the priest of two villages K and N. Long before that our family was also the gountia (headman). They had plenty of land but they sold the village, what land was left was taken away by other jati people by scaring my father ... When I was a young girl in my mother's house, times were tough. I was working all the time and looking for adia (daily-rice) everyday... going hungry often and doing bhuti (wage work) 12 months a year. Things didn't get better after my marriage. My mother in law was harsh to me and my husband had a terrible temper in the early days. I was young and did not speak up, just nodded my head and said yes. My first child died, it was a girl. Then I had my two boys, both were sick with 'alti' while in the womb. We spent so much money taking them to hospitals. We pawned everything and had to flee the village to stay with my uncle who lives in K, a forest village for some years. We had thought then that it was the end of us that we would never come back.... It is not that things have changed much but we are somewhat better now, we are finally making duli (rice field) out of our share of land, made a well last year, used that water to grow and sell vegetables this summer, just now my children are in good health, going to school...' (Field notes, March 2003)

I had this conversation with Jamna, a young Binjhal woman, in March 2003, in a village in western Orissa. Here women expressed their concerns and experiences of poverty much more vividly than the reticent, prestige conscious men. Jamna's

¹ The name of the state has changed to Odisha, from 2011.

account of hardship, hunger, destitution, struggling to find work and survive on low wages, death of children and flight are common to trajectory of lives led by villagers unsupported by land and social resources. Her specific experiences also derive from the positions of women of impoverished families, their struggles to care for children, the economic burden that they carried and for which they laboured for much of their lives and their relationships with men within and outside their family. In these conversations Jamna, revealed the commonly held beliefs of wellbeing, expressed claims of identity, provided explanations for the causes of poverty and noted the changes in living conditions over time.

In the lifecycle of agrarian families, the earliest stages were associated with specific vulnerabilities. With the marriage of adult sons, new families emerged as independent hearth groups. But unsupported by land and with labour of adult women locked into childbirth and childcare, new families barely managed to sustain themselves. For such families, the ability of adults and children to do manual work for wages was essential, hunger was ever present and access to credit networks considered vital.

In Jamna's case a series of crisis in the early stage of her married life had compelled her family to leave their village. Flight is viewed as one of the terrible outcomes of poverty, since it disrupts ties of community and the sense of identity and continuity articulated through links with land. In the context of lack of opportunity apart from agriculture and scarce land in places like Western Orissa, rights to livelihood resources once lost, were difficult to retrieve. Forced to subsist on increasingly shrinking parcels of land, internal competition over land was high. It was not uncommon for families at the early stage to lose their rights over agricultural fields to equally impoverished members of their own or other social groups.

Personal hardship or experiences of poverty was not an easy subject for villagers. It was considered demeaning and un-prestigious to associate oneself with poverty and whenever possible people were careful to describe it comparatively, with reference to elsewhere, other times, places or kinds of people. Moreover the viewpoint that poverty was a socially inadmissible stigmatic condition derived from its association with the intrinsic attribute of subordinate social groups such as adivasi-people.

Jamna belonged to one such group, the Binjhals. The Binjhals were represented in the local society as adivasi people lacking remunerative skills, cultivating ability and foresight. Most Binjhals accepted these representations about themselves though emphasizing that in the past they had held prestigious positions associated with kingship and priesthood in the local society and which they had subsequently lost. These positions were, in the pre-colonial and colonial period (in different ways), repositories of superior landed status, political power and prestige. Loss of these positions and the resulting domination by other jati groups are common themes in Binjhal poverty accounts. Jamna, like other Binjhal people compared her present situation as better than their gullible ancestors who had been forced to sell their land, had eaten forest foods and nearly perished from hunger.

For the Binjhals, family accounts are marked by the continual efforts to revive and redefine the status of the past as well as communicate the losses experienced by the community and link them to rights obtainable from the state. Specific stories of the Binjhals, also offer new insights into the transformation of forest areas with the establishment of British colonial rule in Western Orissa during the nineteenth century. Binjhal identities entangled in stories of past importance, gradual decline, tenuous survival and recent resurgence thus add historical depth and structural anchoring to the local experiences and cultural narratives of poverty.

In general, the association of forested isolation with hunger is widespread in the local society. Here, the only source of wealth and employment had been the fertile fields of a few large farmer and headman families. Being hungry was about being exploited by local landlords, labouring on starvation wages, and transferring ones meagre resources to the more powerful members of the society in order to survive. Local landlords were viewed as centres of order and stability as well as intrinsically exploitative and corrupt people. In recent times, increased sources of wage labouring and public welfare expenditure have enabled village people to articulate a sense of freedom with respect to past dependence. But this discourse belies the actual living conditions of people framed by seasonal stress, absence of viable livelihoods.

1.2. Research Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to understand the meanings and conditions of poverty through the words, representations and memories of farmers and farm workers in a village in Orissa, located in the forest belt of east-central India. The point is to understand how everyday hardship was defined, interpreted, represented and perceived as a problem by people in a geographically peripheral place with high incidence of absolute poverty. A related concern is to understand the historical processes that have produced the structural conditions and manifestations of poverty in the agricultural and regional society.

In anthropological understanding of living situations village people appear not as passive victims of inexorable systems, but as subjects and social agents empowered with structured but definite patterns of agency. But in the context of high levels of absolute poverty, that makes survival itself tenuous, assumptions of agency must be declared and explored with care. Here the objective is to examine the relationship between the fragmented and heterogeneous cultural discourses with the resilient patterns of dearth and inequalities that constitute poverty experiences in particular places and times. By drawing upon and extending the discussions in history and anthropology about popular recollection the point is to understand the moral and political interests and claims that are expressed through memories and how as 'oral records' such recollections provided greater insight into the historical processes and social structural change in forest areas of India that has shaped the contours of poverty in places like western Orissa villages.

In the broad approach used by this thesis: social representations of poverty are not opposed to objectively measured economic poverty, or presented as benign and homogeneous cultural worldviews that contradict universalist notions. Instead the effort has been to understand how socially agreed meanings about realities of deprivation become legitimate with the increasing destitution of specific groups and categories and how they acquire stability through effects of symbolic power that operate not just from the realm of anonymous external structures but also through

the practices of subjects dominated within structured configurations. Underpinning the shared worldview of western Orissa villagers was the hierarchical distribution and redistribution of resources embedded in broader processes that perpetuated the marginality of people inhabiting specific social categories. Based on practises of livelihoods and identities cultural discourses of poverty also naturalised social inequalities and reproduced caste and gender hierarchies such that poverty was apprehended as self evident for people and categories; linked with the hazardous, hungry and forest dwelling pasts.

Social Definition of Poverty in Particular Places and Times

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical and methodological background of this research and to review the literature directly relevant to it. The chapter also describes the contribution of this research for understanding the causes and realities of poverty in an erstwhile forest covered region of India, using historical and anthropological approaches to investigate the relational and meaningful narratives of subordinated groups about their changing lives; insights which can illuminate and substantiate broader debates and discourses about poverty and forest dwellers, the adivasi/tribal people of India.

1.3 The Village in Western Orissa

This thesis is based on a detailed study of social relationships and historical experiences of people in a small place, Mahulkonda (pseudonym) village² in the erstwhile hilly, forested and drought prone region called Borasambar in the district of Bargarh in western Orissa. Borasambar constitutes a backward and impoverished part of an agriculturally productive district. The administrative block where the fieldwork village was located, 89% of the households were classified as below poverty line families. Most families (270 households, 1287 people) were cultivators holding small, dispersed fields of highly variable agricultural yield and from several different jati groups. Village families were divided into locally defined categories of rich or poor (big or small households) based on their relationship with land, labour

² All village names and names of people have been altered in this thesis. This was a decision that I took based on village peoples' preference to remain anonymous.

and non-farming incomes. Reflecting the pattern of the wider region, particular jati groups predominated in the rich category while the poor comprised of various low status, jati groups, such as the adivasi people who lived by labouring incomes.

When sedentary revenue villages with clearly demarcated borders were created for encouraging and controlling the rapidly spreading upland cultivation in the zamindari of Borasambar, in the late nineteenth century, the area had been covered by dense, impenetrable forests intersected with grasslands and teeming with wild animals (Grant 1870). Borasambar zamindari came under the jurisdiction of the British district of Sambalpur in 1864. Of the 17 zamindaris that were incorporated under Sambalpur district during colonial rule and came under uniform land tenure and revenue policies, it was the largest (840 sq.miles.), most remote and least populated; a veritable frontier area. Present villages, social identities, patterns of livelihoods and land use and distribution emphasize the collaborative efforts of bureaucratic organization and local enterprise that took place during the times of the British colonial rule that supported the expansion of farming to contain the reputed dissidence of forest dwellers in the late nineteenth century.

1.4 The Principal Protagonists: Binjhals of Borasambar

The discussion around the social representation and conditions of poverty in this thesis is centred on the Binjhals, a local important social group. Binjhals were an adivasi or tribal group, who were disproportionately visible among the poor and epitomised poverty in the local society. But they were also associated with pre-colonial kingship and political dominance in the region. The Binjhals (118,116 people) are officially designated as a scheduled tribe and live largely in the districts of Sambalpur, Bargarh and Bolangir in compact areas associated with the ex-zamindari areas of the Orissa and Chattisgarh.³

Early twentieth century gazetteers had described the Binjhals as an aristocratic subdivision of the forest tribe and linked them with the Chattisgarhi Baigas: who were recognised as shamans and shifting cultivators (Russell and Hiralal 1916, Elwin

³ 2001. Tribal Census of Orissa.

1986). These works of colonial anthropology, had traced the similarity of the Binjhals with the Gonds, a major adivasi group who lived in central India (Fuchs 1965, Jay 1973, Babb 1975, Sundar 1999). Binjhals also lived in close geographical proximity with the larger adivasi groups of inland Orissa: the Kondhs (Bailey 1957, 1960, Padel 2000) and the Saora/Sora (Vitebsky1993). In their narratives, Binjhals appear as both participants and victims in historical processes that have created particular categories and conditions of poverty in the regional society.

Like other tribal or adivasi groups in India, Binjhal experiences can be read as effects of adverse integration of forest area inhabitants with mainstream Indian society, with the coming of modern bureaucratic state, capitalism and market economy and effected through processes of de-militarisation and sedentarization of forest kingdoms, in the nineteenth century with the advent of British rule. Nomadic forest dwelling groups may have inspired fear in plain communities, but following colonial rule and in post independent India, such groups became associated with marginality: suggestive of poverty, racial inferiority, cultural distinctiveness and developmental backwardness (Padel 2000, Hardiman 1994, Skaria 1999, Bates 1995). Standard narratives of assimilation and victimisation, often suggest that poverty or adivasi marginality was a peculiarly modern phenomenon compared to which the pre-colonial situation appears to be resplendent both materially and symbolically. However in this thesis, the objective is not to emphasize pristine visions of pre-colonial stability and cultural homogeneity. The objective instead is to highlight the material and ecological hardships and realities of forest areas that local inhabitants have experienced as they try to overcome the limitations of their specific locations and obtain other identities and standards of wellbeing amidst the historical and power-laden contours of poverty and subordination in western Orissa.

Theoretical Framework of the Thesis and Related Literature

In this section a number of different subjects and associated literature has been explored in order to situate and understand poverty expressions of impoverished villagers as well as Binjhal evaluations of their identities and the past. Broadly, these discussions and analyses have been organised into the following thematic and

theoretical sections: 1.5) contested meanings in poverty debates, 1.6) memory, history and agency, 1.7) debates about the adivasi/tribal forest dwelling people in India and 1.8) social production of marginality.

1.5 Contested Meanings in the Poverty Debate

In general defining poverty is an institutional exercise carried on by governments, experts and academics underpinned by the broader goal of assigning accountability, responsibility and resources towards remedying a human situation that is morally and politically unacceptable. Measuring poverty and devising programs to change the situation of people affected by the phenomenon is a proclaimed priority of most nation-states (Dreze, Hussain and Sen 1995, Hulme and Shepherd 2003:403). But outside the influential institutional context where the phenomenon is routinely debated, poverty may be experienced and discussed in very different ways, producing meanings of needs, necessities and causal explanations that provide understanding about existing situations and living conditions of different people and communities. In recent times such 'non-elite' understanding of living condition has found a niche in mainstream analysis of poverty arising from a growing debate around the definition and concept of poverty and the applicability and the efficacy of universal poverty standards.

While doing something about poverty is an ethical and moral imperative, a growing stream of criticism has targeted the conceptualization of poverty through conventional methods based on the notion of objective and scientific measurement of quantifiable indicators. Some have revisited longstanding and recurrent themes in poverty debates such as the universal versus relative positions.⁴ While universally applicable poverty is associated with the concept of absolute poverty based on the inability of people to meet 'the fundamental requirements of existence', relative poverty addresses the comparative and diverse nature of human needs within and across particular societies (Giddens and Griffiths 2006:352). Since people experienced feelings of deprivation through the social position they inhabited

⁴ For the debate on the concept of absolute versus relative nature of poverty, see, (Sen 1982, 1983, 1986, Gordon and Townsend 2001:51). The consensus from the debate is that if the concept of absolute or core poverty is described as varying between societies and over time, then it comes closer to the concept of relative poverty.

(Runciman 1966, Townsend 1979:48, Bourdieu et al 1999) or subjectively felt needs (Piachaud 1987), poverty meanings could depart widely from conventional measures. It was moreover based on the assumption that people needed mere subsistence and did not aspire to improve their social position or attain greater wellbeing (Townsend 1979, Green 2006:10, Gledhill 1997, Hulme and Shepherd 2003). Others have criticized the neglect of structural causes and processes in conventional poverty analysis. When poverty is treated as a discrete and isolable condition, its historical specificity and multi-dimensional nature suffer neglect (Mosse 2007, Shepherd and Hulme 2003:405, Spicker 2007:14). Adhering to the notion of relatively homogeneous human condition and categories of poor served to obscure social processes that made people subject to poverty (Breman 2007). In a departure from these positions, critiques informed by post-structural theories have suggested that the universal poverty concepts were not just fallacious but also had coercive purposes and effects. These were simply the 'myth and construct of particular civilizations' or reflected the agenda of international development policy and institutions and when policies and interventions informed by such concepts were imposed on powerless populations, they transformed and reduced meaningful lives into demeaning caricatures of poverty (Rahnema 1992, Escobar 1995, Green 2000:3, 2006, Goldberg 2007, Wood 1985, LeTouche 1992: 251).

An important outcome of the above critique has been the search for approaches and concepts that were based on and in turn would produce a better insight into the lived realities of poverty situations and conditions in comparison to constructs that were conceptualized and shaped by the perceptions, values and interests of institutions. One of the solutions was to acknowledge and attribute greater space to the perspectives of people, who were identified as experiencing poverty (Saith 2005:4607, Lister 2006, Spicker 2007, Green 2006). Including the 'perspectives, perceptions and priorities of the poor', highlighting their 'coping and adaptive strategies' and 'knowledge and abilities' was necessary to improve the efficacy of poverty assessment and to enact appropriate interventions and enact policies and legislations for eliminating poverty (Chambers 1983, 1995, Beck 1994, Shepherd and Hulme 2003, Wood 2003). Most often the point of such exercises was to generate indicators of poverty based on local frameworks of wellbeing rather than guided by external and predetermined poverty constructs. It was also argued that

this approach promoted 'positive conceptualization of poor people' usually presented as 'malnourished, underemployed or oppressed' victims and create political spaces for negotiation and public action (Beck 1994, Beck and Nesmith 2001:120, Norton et al. 2001:12). However approaches that view poverty as a matter of simply obtaining 'subjective' viewpoints of an identified population group and those that implicitly suggest cultural stability, autonomy and homogeneity of local societies are problematic. Ethically disturbing questions about adopting relativism have long troubled poverty researchers who have raised various concerns about according autonomy to the viewpoints of social groups and communities who were marginalised with respect to broader economic and political systems.

Even the poorest people have opinions about their conditions and focussing on their strategies help to establish agency and to dispel stigmatising myths about their situation (Scheper-Hughes 1992, Boyce and Hartman 1998, Wadley 1994, Charlesworth 2000). But poverty researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds have also feared that long term poor people maybe accepting of their conditions (Narayan et al 2000) or concerned with maintaining existing levels of consumption (Chambers 1983 cited in Hulme and Shepherd 2003:409), may misrecognize poverty or produce differentiated reactions towards it (Cloke and Little 1997) and perceive a sense of wellbeing even in situations in which they were experiencing severe deprivation of basic needs (Sen 1986:43). Often widespread acceptance of dominant ideologies promoted by the elites in particular societies produce support for existing social arrangements including beliefs and attitudes about societal inequalities (Kluegel and Smith 2009: 23). Perspectives of subordinate groups were forms of knowledge shaped by 'relations of power, authority and gender' (Mosse 2001:19). The point of poverty investigation should be the powerlessness of impoverished people rather than a celebratory account of their resources and resourcefulness. As Harriss-White (2005:882) argues: not only the destitute have 'no collective political voice' but that they are actively 'deprived of voice' and it is the latter issue that was of greater significance for understanding poverty.

Despite its longstanding association with marginal communities where conventionally measured economic deprivation is found, the discipline of Anthropology has been criticised for 'diverting its gaze' from poverty (Farmer 2005:12), in its quest for culture

and meaning. Anthropology has often been unable to address issues such as inequalities, produced by long processes of deprivation, and 'structural violence' (Farmer 2005, cited in Mosse 2007:7, Schaffer 1985). 'Ethnographers did little more than mention the terrible infant mortality, miniscule incomes, low life expectancy, inadequate diets and abysmal healthcare that remained so routine' (Starn 1992 cited in Farmer 2005:12). The preoccupation with stable or purely symbolic views of lived worlds failed to record the material implications, both causes and effects of poverty (Scheper-Hughes 1992, Bourgois 1996, Wilmsen and Denbower 1990, Mosse 2007, Roseberry 1989). Could projects that were focused essentially on the human and social agency, the doings and beings of people, however impoverished or subordinated they were, be reconciled with the subject of disempowerment and disability through deprivation?

Some scholars have argued that the point should be to turn anthropology's strengths to attend to the diverse concepts and experiences of poverty in different societies, locate the effects of broader structural patterns and change processes on the incidence of poverty (Booth, Leach and Tierney 1999:38). It can further be used to analyse the complex, value-laden and political nature of knowledge production as well as its social and historically located nature in particular localities (Mosse 2001:19, Fairhead and Leach 2000).

Clearly, describing subordinate people as subjects with 'voices and choices' can indicate a failure to recognise and examine the political economic causes, the social-structural underpinnings and stark material manifestations of deprivation. Thus understanding how power operates in specific social spheres and how social persons think and act within unequal contexts must inform any investigation that deals with poverty. The discourses and explanations of poverty and wellbeing in western Orissa must be viewed with respect to the historical changes in the material conditions of small-scale cultivators of rain-fed farms in a geographically remote place and the production of social categories within the relations and asymmetries of power in the local agrarian field from which these evaluations are voiced and for which they are pertinent. At the same time perspectives and viewpoints about social realities produced by village people cannot be split into misrecognized meaning and objective facts or structural agency and passive acceptance. The solution to this

problem can be sought in social theories that investigate agency while analyzing its production by the distribution of power that underscore both internal and external constraints and link social interests to the structural positions that people occupy in the concerned social field.

Understanding of power in this thesis draws upon Weber's conception of domination and 'belief in legitimacy' and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. The perpetuation of domination according to Weber (1978:213), is explainable not through purely material or ideal motives but through 'belief in legitimacy'. Since powerful positions or authority are confirmed only when their particular claims to legitimacy are accepted as valid, exercise of domination always proceeds through variable amounts or degrees of compliance. For Bourdieu, subjective perceptions of the social world was structured by models of perception that expressed the 'state of relationship of symbolic power' (Bourdieu 1990:133). And yet, 'the social world, with its divisions, is also something that comes into existence through the individual and collective constructions of social agent, 'in cooperation and conflict'; these constructions taking place through positions occupied in the social space structured by the distribution of different kinds of capitals (Bourdieu 2007:275). Larger structures both constrain and enable agency of social actors, while discourses and representations are grounded in social relations that enable the discussion of power and inequalities (Ortner 2006). Local discussions and evaluation of living condition entail asking questions about dominant beliefs and construction of social categories through which specific poverty meanings became pertinent. By examining the moral reasoning and evaluations of inequalities and injustice of village people that use both temporal comparison as well as comparisons derived from social relations and group identities, the broader aim of this thesis is to relate cultural understanding of poverty with symbolic power, social structure and historical context.

Unlike Marxist and Foucauldian concepts of power that operates purely on the structural realm and produces the groups or categories who are acted upon by inexorable forces of capitalism or discursive systems and to which people respond in certain predetermined ways, Bourdieu's theory is fundamentally about how power is reproduced, embodied and experienced through the structured agency of socially positioned individuals. Weber's concept of power posits the necessity of compliance

in the exercise of implicit, non-coercive authority that is the most effective means of subjection. Since Bourdieu melds the symbolic and the material as well as structure and agency in the production of social existence through his argument of the mutually constitutive nature of symbolic nature of actions and experiences and materially produced conditions of existence of acting individuals, his theory is helpful in understanding the objectifications of poverty through its social location in particular groups, places, times and narrative contexts. The point here is to ask what representations of experiences reveal about the social divisions, categories and relations (such as adivasi and jati, gender and class) occupied by the narrating subjects and how inhabiting and constructing these meaningful identities and relationships lends emphasis to specific aspects of their lives and produces their view points about poverty.

Analyzing the production and perpetuation of social divisions are important not just because they reflect the pattern of distribution of status and wealth in the local society with reference to the objective position that villagers' occupy in the relations of production through differential control of land, salaried jobs, religious posts or elected political positions but because as 'symbolic systems' these serving as 'instruments of domination' in the lived and habituated positions and contribute to the experiences and construction of the social realities of living conditions. Applying these insights to the representations of poverty experiences from and pertinent to western Orissa villages, enable us to understand how, the standards of living, notions of wellbeing, moral codes and norms of redistributive justice found here, arise through cultural domination exerted by ideologies of civilized-farming that legitimise the existence of poverty through the construction of difference based on a barbaric forest dwelling past. Discussions about the past were fundamental to ways in which social difference was understood.

When western Orissa villagers depict their past as forested, deprived, violent and barbaric, the antithesis of progress and civilization, were they like rural communities elsewhere in the world responding to their assimilation into modern state systems? Were these narratives about the past derived from and affected by the 'national culture' (Hall 1996) and 'development discourse' (Pigg 1992, Woost 1993)? Did they like other communities marginalized within broader systems view their past not as

objects of nostalgia but only as 'symbols of deprivation'? (Behar 1991:348). It is true that villagers try in many ways to distance themselves from their past of forest dwelling by devaluing existent practices (such as, traditional food habits, expressive traditions, attire, livelihoods, styles of speaking and marriage practises) routinely negating these as the remnants of the impoverished past. At the same time, discourses about the past also revealed greater awareness of rights that have enabled village people to offer piercing criticism of the times when they had slept hungry or worked for local landlords unquestioningly with little or no wages for mere survival.

Stories about the past were contradictory, about experiences of destitution, losses as well as linked to claims of status and identities that require rearranging elements of the past in appropriate ways. Some aspects of the past, less discussed, is also lived implicitly in everyday practises of livelihoods and being in the world. Framing problems in terms of the past enabled distancing such that people could discuss what is often painful and distressing. In this thesis these various kinds of the pasts of Borasambar villagers, the pasts that had been lived as well as the pasts that are being used, are explored and coupled with patchy archival records an attempt is made to present views and viewpoints about the past. The accounts narrated by the Binjhals, describing rituals of kingship or disputing attributed positions in the social hierarchy or difficult to establish land claims as well as stories about hunger, farming and labouring from the past which are framed by the concerns of village people and which enable them to better understand and situate their present lives. While these explorations into the recollected past reflect contemporary attitudes and perceptions, stories about the past also talk about past events and experiences (Hulme and Kothari 2004:10), that enables us to understand the processes and structures that underpin the distribution of resources and conditions of poverty in the local society over time.

1.6. Remembering and Reframing: Anthropology, History and Memories

South Asian villages were once assumed to have no history only timeless permanence, studies of rural past wrote only about the subordination and

incorporation of villages by city people. Crucially absent from the formulations of the past were the practises of village people and their versions of the past that resided on the 'margins of history' (Ludden 1999). Cohn had observed that, though Indian peasants are seemingly attached to the past, it is necessary to ask what past or pasts they were referring to in order to understand the complexities of the traditional society (2001[1961]: 88). Recent studies in the context of Indian villagers and forest dwellers have reiterated how village memories can provide astute 'appraisals of past autocracy and reveal their understanding of the structural conditions under which helplessness is perpetuated' (Gold and Gujar 2002: 2, 16), or marginality is experienced (Skaria 1999). Bringing to the centre, marginalized points of view about the past has been a strategy for restoring balance in elitist project of history writing as well as bringing to the focus the concerns and agency of subaltern people whose views about the past and whose pasts had rarely considered to have played a determining role in shaping the present.

Centring subordinate peoples' histories or subordinate perspectives about the past has followed various paths from re-interpreting archival evidence to present subaltern agency to privileging memory, oral narratives, myths, legends and traditions, since subaltern groups rarely leave behind documentary trails of their past lives. But working with memories, recollections and oral narratives to construct the past means taking into account the dynamic processes that take place continuously as acting and knowing subjects living in the present produce and construct aspects of their own past for their own purposes and within objective configurations that they inhabit. As Portelli (1991:46) argues in the investigations about the past, it was important to attend to the specific qualities, functions and ways of interpreting written and oral sources. If oral sources are undervalued or if they are overvalued, their specific qualities would be lost, 'turning these sources either into mere supports for traditional written sources or into an illusory cure for all ills.'

In his philosophical treatise, 'memory, history and forgetting', Paul Ricoeur (2006:3) has argued that in investigations of the past one must ask: 'of what are there memories? Whose memory is it?' Through this statement the author opens the discussion about the philosophical split in the concept of memory between the object that is recalled and the person who recalls the object. The act of recollection argues

the author, consists of cognitive and pragmatic aspects. If we begin with the aspect of 'what' is recalled, we recognise the claims of memories to be 'truthful to the past.' But this claim to present a truthful account of the past cannot be upheld because remembering also implies that something was being done. In this way the issue of veracity is compromised. But what emerges here is the subject 'capable of self-recollection', without whom the question, 'whose memory' cannot be asked. Memory therefore is always coupled with agency but this does not invalidate the claims of memory to be about the past that has been lived and that has shaped present lives.

If accounts of the past have to be objective, accurate, and truthful and complete in all respects, popular recollection presents numerous difficulties. Memory as Portelli (2006 [1979]: 37) argues, is not 'a passive depository of facts but an active process of creation of meaning.' Not only does all expressed memory involve the act of social construction of meaning, but being claims about what happened in the past and what morally ought to be done in the present they were always political rather than unmediated or spontaneous (Abu Lughod and Sa'di 2007). Retold memories expressed the state of symbolic power in a given field by 'the shifting line between what could and could not be expressed in public' (Farnsworth-Alvear 1997:96). Historians who have used memory to construct oral histories of places and people for whom written history had been lacking, have long held that memory did not 'transcend the boundaries of the social system in which it exists' and would therefore be limited and biased in nature (Vansina 1965:172). With the recognition that issues of power constituted the making of histories and documented versions of the past were simply 'elite' visions, popular recollection has acquired new credibility.

The inherent limitations of memory (inaccuracy, bias, partial nature) are now considered essential for obtaining specifically situated knowledge about the past. It mattered less what oral histories could contribute towards 'events' but its usefulness was how 'it illuminated the unexplored aspects of the daily lives of 'non-hegemonic classes' (Portelli 2006 [1979]: 36). Memory has also been useful in mounting a radical critique of totalitarian visions in conventional ways of doing history (Gold and Gujar 2002, Skaria 1999). Since memory writes Passerini (1994: 23), 'narrates with the vivid tones of actual experience...creating a history of itself', 'it is much less and perhaps much more than social history.' It is the 'surplus' and difference that is found

in memory, which makes it more valuable than being merely a secondary source for writing social history of a particular time and place. As Portelli argues, oral sources had a different credibility and their importance resided 'not in its adherence to fact but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge. Therefore there are no 'false oral sources' (1991:51). While historians debate different and radical ways of reconstructing the temporal succession of events, anthropologists understand social and individual memories and expressions of the past mainly as manifestations of present pursuits and conceptions determined by cultural ways of being in the world.

For anthropologists, all societies make histories based on the conceptions of their worlds (Hastrup 1992:9). Since effects of events derive from a cultural scheme, the objective reality of a happening was meaningless if it was situated outside a given symbolic system (Sahlins 1983). Thus in traditional anthropological practise, the past had no explanatory value unless interpreted in terms of the present (Bloch 1977). Anthropologists often describe how people, in this case the villagers of Colombian Andes, made history by structuring their evidence based on their assessment of the listeners expectation and based their political activism such as around land claims on such narratives (Rappaport 1988). Retold memories were not 'sources on the past' but historical stories that reflected subversive practises that took place in the loopholes of disciplinary discourses (Farnsworth-Alvear 1997:96). Thus, while frequently engaged with forms of the past in the present, anthropologists have warned against the search for pasts. Conceptions and ideas of the past found in the historical narratives of communities fulfilled social functions, political purposes and express social hierarchy (Peel 1984, Bloch 1977).

Despite this banishment of the 'past' from discourses about the past, essential to anthropological understanding is the attribution of agency to the acting and thinking subjects who construct, create or manage their pasts rather than simply recalling or reproducing it. The centrality of the subject though snugly enmeshed in their cultural cocoons, brings anthropological conceptions of the past, close to the debates around memory. And making this connection enables us to venture into the lost terrain of the objective unfolding of past events, irrespective of how the present subjects of

memories remembered or used it. This is not a task that is impossible since memories were also about events that had taken place in the past.

Many anthropologists argue that the discipline was essentially historical since people 'produce socio-cultural forms through an arch of memories, actions and intentions' and that human action had 'inherent historicity or lived-in-time-ness' (Peel 1995:582). As Ortner (2006) has suggested historically informed ethnography was about demonstrating that cultures were not static or stable but emerged from the operation of internal dynamics (local power relations) and external forces (such as capitalism and colonialism). But 'questions of "history" were also important because they were 'questions of the reproduction or transformation of the relations of inequality.' Historically informed anthropology is essential for understanding the vociferously discussed pasts of social groups and categories present in western Orissa village; to render problematic visions of primordial continuity while retaining the sense that agency was also about persistence and resistance through available resources, social and cognitive, that were to some extent adjustable and seemingly indifferent to the flow of time. Discussions about the pasts of the Binjhals who described themselves and were recognised by others as adivasi/tribal people, was especially pertinent, for understanding how the dynamic interconnections between past and present located in village identities and representational strategies were shaped by changing patterns of social differentiations and living conditions amidst political and economic change processes experienced by forest dwelling communities of India in the recent past.

1.7. Debates about Forest Dwellers: the Adivasi/Tribal Communities of India

Historical marginality seems to lend itself readily to the description and analysis of the various forms of discrimination and deprivation experienced by tribal or adivasi people of India. They were described by anthropologists of the early twentieth century as people and communities who lived in the hills and forest covered plateau areas between the borders of pre-colonial state systems and colonial administrative boundaries in India. Categorised as different and distinct from dwellers of plains, valleys and kingdom centres in social organization and religious beliefs, around them

existed the aura of dissidence, rebellion, an outsider status, as though they were and wished to be fugitives escaping the order and control of older kingdoms and emergent bureaucratic states. The areas they lived in have been described as 'refuge areas at the border of state systems, lands which are politically marginal and topographically 'jangli' or wild (Fox 1971:102, Skaria 1999).

For many observers forest dwelling communities constituted more than anything a highly exploited economic underclass (Beteille 1998, Guha 1999, van Schendel and Bal 2002). Moreover they were viewed as residing on 'the margins of caste and the periphery of power structures determined by caste and class' (Sivaramakrishnan 1995: 29). Though there are historical uncertainties, some anthropologists have argued that adivasi people formed an ancient stratum of the population across tropical Asia, original inhabitants who have been surrounded and dispossessed by larger settled communities of rice growing population (Vitebsky 1993). Adivasi people are also identified through their difference from mainstream Hindu society through their unique cultural practises and occupations, religious beliefs, egalitarian social organisation, innate ecological wisdom and historic episodes of militancy. Extended protective legislation, first by the British colonial government and later through 'government schedules' by the post-independent state, in 2001, 68 million people in India were identified as scheduled tribes through their past or present association with forest dwelling (Pfeffer and Behera 2002:3). In Orissa where the present thesis is based, 8.14 million people, divided into 64 different scheduled tribes proclaimed their adivasi identity. The contemporary conception of the tribal derives to a great extent from the era of British colonial administration through the discourses of ethnology, census and classification systems that accompanied the imperatives of greater administrative control, agrarian intensification and commercial extraction in localities that were in the pre-colonial period tenuously tied to regional state systems (Sivaramakrishnan 1995:22).

Tribal people have been viewed as victims of powerful exploitative, predatory forces. From gradually encroaching and retreating peasantry through centuries to processes unleashed by colonial rule such as accelerated commercialization of agriculture, introduction of property regimes and reservation of forests in the nineteenth century and the increasing claims of the post-independent state on the resources that

sustain these communities and their economic base. The displacement of the 'tribal' people from their ancestral lands and their subsequent experiences of loss has been widely researched by anthropologists who have written about the tribal peoples in India. The predominant theme in such works has been the constant threat of destruction of a pristine, unique but vulnerable culture and economy, by external invasive forces (Elwin 1986[1939], Fuchs 1965, Furer-Haimendorf 1979, Bailey 1960, Sinha 1981, Singh 1985). With each encounter with powerful exploitative outsiders: 'upper-caste Hindus', advanced plains dwellers, rich efficient peasants, moneylenders, the forest department, the new industrial project of the post-independent State, the 'tribal' has made some new losses. The image of a beleaguered community under siege has persistently fitted the social condition of people described as tribal. While past research had emphasized the economic and political effects of processes leading to tribal marginality, recent scholarship have given an equally important weight to the symbolic practises that diminished such communities.

In ancient South Asian society distinction between civilized society and nature was expressed through the terms 'grama' (village) and 'aranya' (forest) that implied complementary but unequal relationship between the inhabitants of the two realms. These conceptions were superimposed by the prejudice of British administrators and writers in the nineteenth century who tended to describe the residents of hill-forest areas as 'primitives,' 'savages' and 'wild hill tribes' (Van Schendel 1990:103, Bal and Van Schendel 2002). In colonial discourse the tribal was imagined as a backward and racially inferior groups distinct and outside the 'caste-bound' society (Bayly 1995, Bates 1995). According to some historians, these colonial era beliefs were not continuous with the pre-colonial society where plains and forests intermingled and periodically advanced and retreated but brought decisive exclusion and marginality of groups defined as tribal through their rigid boundary drawing between civilization and wildness (Skaria 1999). As 'wildness' became associated with marginality, social and ritual inferiority and political powerlessness and stripped of other meanings, local communities shaped their identities through 'a rejection of wildness.' Assumptions and negative stereotypes from the colonial era that described the tribal as dirty, naked, promiscuous, lazy, addicted to drink, superstitious and essentially 'ignorant' or 'backward' were carried well into postcolonial India (Padel 2000:290).

In recent times people recognised and classified as tribal have increasingly adopted the identity of the adivasi. A name that signifies original rights and subsequent losses through external exploitation, assert prior claims to natural resources in their inhabited region and works as an instrument for empowerment (Corbridge 1988, Xaxa 1999). The share of scheduled tribe population to total population has increased through successive census-decades as more communities have been included in the constitutional list of scheduled tribes through their own requests (Xaxa 1999). The adoption of adivasi identity is a response to the demeaning identities and status of forest dependent groups within the mainstream Indian society. Contemporary adivasi identity is a political identity and creative strategy based on establishing and asserting 'cultural ties to land' (Baviskar 2005). If tribal culture and identity are ancient and a unique way of being in the world that was threatened by multiple external predatory forces of modernity (Padel 2000), they were also strategies or political idioms of expressing dissent or making claims that were increasingly taken up by groups and people suffering from forested isolation and experiencing exploitation from mainstream groups and communities and projects of the state.

Studies about adivasi people have increasingly become enmeshed in an essentialist versus constructivist debate. According to Padel (2000:20): 'the best working definition of the 'tribe' should take account of colonial history, and the modern political situation but essentially follows peoples' own definition of themselves.' Being adivasi, above all was a modern identity that provided forest dwellers with a positive identity and yet signifies their collective losses (Skaria 1999) and that it was simultaneously a meaningful term and symbolic resource that enabled the negotiation of developmental rights from the state (Corbridge 2004:146), not historical residues but active identities emerging from a process of response to incorporation by a variety of external oppressive factors (Baviskar 2008[1995]: 89). The point in this thesis is not to negate 'primordial claims' or be restricted to its uses for the present but to allow a historical narrative to take shape drawing upon contemporary self-representations of adivasi people who weave their narratives from the fragments of the past and use these to support their present claims.

The attempt in this thesis is to understand self recognised identities but go beyond these to investigate how these have taken shape historically; and created and marked by the production of 'political, symbolic and positional boundaries (Hall 1991, 1994:30). In order to do so, it is necessary to briefly leave the confines of adivasi or tribal debates and reconnect with other historical discussions about transformations and translations in strategies of rule, regimes of property and land use and new economic opportunities through opening up of forest areas for agrarian production and improved communication to trade the surplus, that had taken place during the period of British colonial rule and which I believe are relevant for understanding the changing fortunes of politically dominant pre-colonial forest dwelling groups like the Binjhals in western Orissa. But to understand the specific trajectories of forest dwelling groups and their memories of loss, it is necessary to look at the apparent continuity of kingly rule through the period of British administration in places like western Orissa informed by some of the debates around pre-colonial kingship.

Transformation in strategies of rule was an important effect of colonial administration and a subject that is less discussed with reference to adivasi research. While oral tradition and village memories in central India speak of the tribes' role in pre-colonial kingship (Padel 2000, Mahapatra 1986, Sinha 1962, Sanyal 1987, Singh 1987, Roy 1912, Gell 1997), these have been generally subsumed under evidence of present day status claims of adivasi elite (Deliege 1997, Baviskar 2008[1995], Kulke 2001). Research among the central Indian Bhils have shown the significance of kingship among forest dwelling people was not simply a recent development derived from the preoccupation of the adivasi elite but also connected to past experiences and identities emerging from exercising political control in forest areas. Based on oral traditions of Bhil villagers Skaria's (1999) study theorizes Bhil kingship as an alternate cultural model based not on Brahmanical legitimacy but the 'enactment of wildness'. Similarly, Felix Padel (2000) has described the unique relationship between the Hindu kings and tribal chiefs in inland Orissa in which the tribal were not merely subjects of the king but considered themselves responsible for appointing and dismissing their kings when they outlived their usefulness or stepped outside the bounds of their roles. According to the Konds, the Hindu kings were the means with which they 'tasted the outside world'. Colonial ruler had changed the balance of such relationship between the worlds of the clansmen and the caste ordered society.

What has increasingly emerged from such fine grained histories is that in the past forest dwelling people could maintain a degree of autonomy from the mainstream and keep a foothold in such social formations through their political strategies that both supported and subverted the dominant practises of kingship. Imposition of forest reservation, new regimes of property rights, growing significance of Brahmanical cultural models, effects of colonial rule, and the opening up of tribal territories for economic exploitation (Hardiman 2006) must be viewed in conjunction with the development, demise or transformation of these practises. Sivaramakrishnan (1999:86) describes a similar process in the woodland areas of South Bengal, Santhal parganas and neighbouring Chotanagpur: as 'British making of tribal places' where impoverished and hilly tribal landscapes emerged from the pacification of the Paharias of Rajmahal, the spread of sedentary cultivation, creation of new villages and the migration of the Santhals who became known for their tree cutting and agricultural skills, later displacement and protection of the Santhals and later distinguishing tribal or aboriginal inhabitants from Hindus. 'Pioneering settled agricultures differentiated the successful aboriginals from the unsuccessful ones.' (Ibid: 85).

Kingship in recent times has emerged as an important subject of historical research on India. Studies about kingship have transformed standard understanding of caste ordered Indian society. An important finding of such studies has been the ritual centrality but dispersed power of the pre-colonial king in the Indian society. It is well established that segmentary clan based bodies around kingdom margins enabled the consolidation kingship and patrolled kingdom boundaries. Depending upon political circumstances same groups could turn predators and ravage kingdom centres, thereby negotiating new rights and old claims with the local kings. In the eighteenth century such regimes were common throughout India, being the 'co-sharers of the realm of the kings' (Wink 1986). Hilly inland Orissa was similarly characterized by dispersed structures of power between the political leaders (the rajas, zamindars and village headmen) and their subject people within the region (Padel 2000:62). The suppression of militarily active clan based polities and the transformation of local kingship into fragmented, semi autonomous little kings, created the field for the emergence of marginalised forest dwelling groups as well as the elites among forest dwellers. In Western Orissa villages, local narratives often

refer to these diverse processes of differentiation within and outside their community related to practises of rule in order to present and define their claims of wellbeing as well as the nature of their losses.

Binjhal stories from the region of Borasambar can be situated within these broader processes and debates around the nature and effect of the momentous changes experienced by forest dwelling people with the establishment of colonial rule. In the early nineteenth century the Binjhals spoke a version of Chattisgarhi Hindi, lived in hilly and forested settlements, and practiced shifting cultivation, had extensive connection with similar groups over the wide expanse of hill-forest area between the local kingdoms of the Mahanadi valley. Binjhals under their zamindar provided conditional support and protection to the boundaries of local kingdoms and made a living through taxing pilgrim and trade routes that traversed through the dense forests and serving in local armies and raiding bands. They were a clan-based group who members occupied many administrative positions (with secular and religious roles) in the pre-colonial zamindari and expressed a diffuse notion of communal land control within their compact territory. Viewed as a law and order problem by the colonial state, the zamindari of Borasambar was first pacified and then incorporated within the British district of Sambalpur in 1864. Over time the Binjhals adopted plough cultivation and gradually moved towards sedentary cultivation and settled village life. This was a process initiated by the British administrative policies but executed through the redefined offices of village headmen and zamindar. Several hundred new revenue villages were carved out of the forests of Borasambar during the court of ward's rule, in the late nineteenth century to provide impetus to this process. In the ensuing decades many Binjhal headmen lost their village-rights for various reasons including the inability to pay revenue demands, and their villages were 'farmed-out' to the purchasers of revenue collecting rights. Binjhal lineages dependent on the land shares associated with headman rights became disconnected from land. As they turned to wage work for the landholders, their situation became similar to other landless labouring people and they were less able to sustain their claims of high social status that receded gradually to their glorious past.

1.8 Social Production of Marginality: Farming, Labouring and Gender

In this thesis I use a concept of marginality to describe the continuous and perpetual struggle over meaning and making a living waged by impoverished people, Binjhals and others from their multiple subordinated subject-positions, struggles which shape and underpin their poverty assessments. The point here has been to address the structural causes as well as the discourses that legitimate the production and perpetuation of multiple subordinate social categories and the structured agency of impoverished people in Borasambar villages rather than taking specific viewpoints about poverty experiences as unanchored interpretations of dominant discourses or the unconscious products of timeless, coherent and apolitical cultural logic.

The term marginality has long existed in the fringes of social science. It has been used to describe, define and classify places, people or social groups in terms of their social, economic, racial or geographical distance and difference from the mainstream and to mark out the peripheries of social and cultural systems (Shields 1991, Li 1999). Researchers of urban poverty have for long used the term to denote the social and behavioural deviance of people living on the periphery of social, economic and political life of great cities, marked by their pervasive poverty, stigmatic identities and precarious livelihoods (Wacquaint 1996). The 'deviant culture' of the 'urban underclasses' has been viewed traditionally as the moral failing of the marked groups or categories as well as structural effect of discrimination and poverty. Marginality has been explained as dominant representations and socially constructed images that have pernicious effects on people (Shields 1991, Li 1999, Mosse 2007). Marginality has been used to define unconventional and unlikely agency through the notion that it incorporates a 'polytheism of scattered practices' or 'cultural activity' that survives despite domination (De Certeau 1984). Crucial to various definition of marginality is the understanding that the concept or phenomenon implies the 'outcome of a long term and on going relationship with power' (Tsing 1993: 90).

In this thesis, I define the concept of marginality, as the life situation of people who occupy a variety of subordinate social positions through their social status based on

jati and gender identities and through their livelihoods. The point being to understand how relational social location compared to others in the recognised field also shapes the meaning, representation and experiences that they offer about their situation. Marginality encapsulates the 'intersectional' perspectives of impoverished villagers and the multiple forms of social inequalities experienced by them as they compete with similarly situated others in the local agrarian society. The form or category of agency under discussion is the farthest from the famed unity, assertiveness and rebellion, dramatic or hidden, of rural communities and subaltern people against oppressive institutions and authority structures based on internal resources derived from their 'moral economy' (Wolf 1982, Thompson 1971, Scott 1985). The emphasis here is on the insidious oppressive effects of domination on the lives of subordinate social groups including their agency that sustains the heterogeneous and internally differentiated rural society through cultural discourses of power and exclusion (Mosse 2007:8).

Marginality is associated with the attribution of subordinate identities to particular social categories. In the village society, it was through jati-identities that people were situated at the forested margins of the local agrarian society. Social categorisation of the Binjhals, and the representations that they produce about their social position; the 'subjective image of the position objectively occupied' (Bourdieu 2004:453) reveal how generational and stigmatic poverty is experienced through identities that also reproduce the locally relevant hierarchy of social positions. Marginality is revealed in the nature of symbolic battles waged locally by Binjhals and others over prestigious identities that have their origins in the specificity of local histories and modes of resource utilization, variable administrative interventions and local adaptations within broader processes of cultural domination and subordination of forest areas under the centralized state system.

Economic mobility was the hardest to achieve from subordinate locations and not surprisingly, local poverty discourses were underpinned by attributed qualities and stereotypes about jati groups who occupied such positions. Identity claims of villagers from subordinate groups consist of the strategic refusals as well as redefinition of forest dwelling jati identities. Most often these narratives are aimed at maintaining difference and distance from other disadvantaged positions and

professing similarities with wealthier and more prestigious people. It is through the opposition between farms and forests, divine and demonic, farmers and farm workers, present and past and literate and non-literate, men and women that present day adivasi identity was cobbled together in the local society. As people sought to distance themselves from their forest dwelling past being adivasi was used not just to classify specific groups like the Binjhals but as a metaphor of past poverty.

Being located on the margins of cultivation is an important aspect and determinant of local poverty meanings. It is associated with specific social identities and categories, people like the Binjhals who would not farm because they were more inclined to hunt or chase or wander in the forest. It is also related to experiences of landlessness and prevalence of hunger that made people dependent on cultivators and excluded them from critical networks of support that was based on the grain stores. The nineteenth century processes of agrarian expansion in Borasambar not only created wealth by settling the forests, but also produced a framework for the socially unequal distribution of this wealth. Agrarian expansion fulfilled the objective of establishing sedentary villages, creating agricultural surplus and a class of landlords through the office of village headmen. It also mobilized the labour of forest dwellers who had not only lost their cultivation rights through changes in land tenure regimes but found it difficult to sustain themselves through forest based resources as farming encroached both symbolically and physically on this terrain.

Even though cultivation remained critically supported by forest dependence, forests were increasingly subordinated and redefined as the source of symbolic and material sustenance for impoverished people. If local narratives indicated that farming in the forests had always been difficult, unpredictable and precarious, they described even more vividly the poverty that came to people who were driven through lack of land and farming capital towards forest dependence. With the coming of irrigation and the spread of education, forests had become even more marginalized and increasingly associated not just with specific identities but with the impoverished times of the past and those who had failed to emerge from their captivity by that past.

Divisions and distinction between farmers and farm-labourers indicated the relations of power and the nature of subordination in the local society. Poverty is associated

with labouring roles of the past that entailed engaging in oppressive social relations with the zamindar, headmen, village landlords and patriarchal lineage heads and demeaning occupations such as tied farm labour. Farm labourers recount experiences of indebtedness, captivity and absence of subsistence security and dependence on ties of unequal client-ship. In the past such associations were not viewed as problematic. The patron-client relation that regulated and structured 'the flow of resources, exchange and power relations and their legitimation in society' despite being built on inequality and difference of power produced strong elements of solidarity (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980:49-50). Criticisms of labouring relations have emerged ironically with the decline in local farming and its inability to sustain rural employment through the fragmenting resource bases of the erstwhile wealthy patrons. Although precarious, multiple, uncertain livelihoods continue to exemplify the conditions of unrelenting material hardship, marginality of local landlordism and their diminished powers enable critical appraisals of living conditions to take shape through discussions about past labouring roles.

Village women's narratives provide different ways of looking at the social realities in rural western Orissa through women's variable and limited agency in different kinds of patriarchal social orders that highlight the contentious struggles between social groups over valued resources. Gender not only constitutes a key dimension of social inequality and a way of signifying power (Scott 1988:42) but also a 'structuring category' (Fernandes 1997). Access to critical social relations of production woven through kinship, residence and patronage was obtained only by marriage (Moore 1988:58) and contributes critically to the specific poverty effects on women in rural India. In western Orissa impoverished women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty through the necessity of maintaining and providing for their families by labouring on low paid work and restricted access to land. Women also face the effects of the changing expectations of village people as they aspire to be more respectable and seek standardization of lifestyles in accordance with a 'national culture'. Gendered marginality is created through the difficulties of living up to the new conceptions of femininity and propriety that makes previous work roles problematic while shouldering the burdens of making ends meet through precarious livelihood practises that takes village families to their forested past.

The frequently articulated discourse of being hungry and becoming free, village people charted their distancing from un-prestigious and un-remunerative occupational categories and situations. The sense of improvement was both relative and relational. Freedom can be defined in terms of a triadic relation between ‘an agent, certain preventing conditions, and certain doings or becomings of the agent’ (Carter 2012). Borasambar villagers describe un-freedom in terms of their past dependence on patriarchal family heads and local landlords, the forests which prevented them from farming their fields, their own fears of authority and strange places that prevented them from pursuing work elsewhere; and the debility that came from the experience of perpetual hunger. Freedom here implied modest gains linked with increasing competition between village landlords, public welfare works, the ability to balance a variety of precarious livelihoods, modest improvement in wages and to be able to participate in selecting and dismissing their political leaders. They were no longer at the command of others but what they were free to do and become underscores their great poverty despite modest gains from the hungry past when they lived as the captive labour force of local farmer landlords who accumulated wealth through their growing impoverishment.

1.9. Selection of the Fieldwork Area

There is something decidedly anachronistic about ‘village studies’ under current disciplinary climate of anthropological practise when conflation of people and place is viewed as analytically suspect and the bounded-ness, stability and homogeneity of locality or local cultural forms perceived as a figment of decades of elitist imagination. A review of South Asian studies by Fuller and Spencer (1990), points out the declining number of ‘village studies’ from India since the late eighties. Although the direction of my thesis does not pursue the same subjects as the Indian village studies of the fifties and sixties, in many ways it is primarily a village study. Long term rural dwellers who have resided in a place for several generations and for whom their shared conception of the past, experiences of livelihoods, landscapes and social world and relationships remained deeply meaningful social realities.

The choice of the Borasambar, stems from my prior familiarity with this region through my time spent as an Oxfam development worker, living and extensively travelling extensively in the districts of Western Orissa. This experience also resulted in my making many local friends, village people who had been NGO employees at some time and whom I contacted initially to help me with my selection and entry into the village for my primary fieldwork. Eventually I chose a village that I had never visited as part of a development project. It was also a fairly large village that represented all the major jati groups in Borasambar. The point had been to begin at this village and move on to newer places, but I was captured instead by the stories and underlying micro politics of village lineages and families and trying to understand the social relations that made their realities meaningful. When I did visit other villages and the archives it was an exploration that was guided by and used as a point of reference the stories and knowledge that I had obtained at Mahulkonda village.

While there is no dispute regarding the fact that the eastern state of Orissa is among the poorest regions of India, standard discourses and measures lack understanding of local conditions and unable to accord importance to experiences (de Haan and Dubey 2005). My initial aim had been to disrupt dominant myths and stereotypes about Western Orissa's rural society and its people by highlighting the agency and resistance of village people. The point had been to conduct a relatively open ended research to see how people coped with their everyday hardships and what they had to say about broader discourses of famine and tribal-ness that organised so completely the external descriptions of their region. A broader aim was also to re-theorise 'traditional', non-modern places by focussing on peoples' agency and conceptions of modernity and development (Pigg 1992, Tsing 1993) and drawing insight from post-structuralist & postcolonial theories, to problematize the concept of discrete cultures (Escobar 1995, 1999, Ferguson and Gupta 1997, Abu-Lughod, 1993). To some extent, the research product fulfilled the broader aim of understanding and explaining how human agency operates in complex, contradictory ways in a stratified locality among differently situated groups of peoples. However the fieldwork process was guided not by these broad initial objectives, but by the

subjects that were debated and discussed by village people at different times and narrative contexts during my stay in the area.

1.10. Position of the Researcher

As argued by Ortner (1995: 173), 'Ethnography' has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self...as the instrument of knowing. Classically, this kind of understanding has been closely linked with fieldwork, in which the whole self physically and in every other way enters the space of the world that the researcher seeks to understand...the ethnographic stance is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality a constructive and interpretive mode as a bodily process in space and time.' But as Moore (1999) points out, anthropologists do not work as unproblematic representatives of their culture of 'origin'. Increasingly ethnographic fieldwork is accomplished with the awareness and attendant discomfort of power differentials and with the well established realisation that there were no secure grounds or Archimedean point from which to observe and produce 'true' representation of the 'other' (Clifford 1986:22), just as there were no 'innocent ethnographic enquiries' (Rosaldo 1986:90).

The way in which anthropologists set out to observe difference in order to illuminate the particularities of cultural experience is defined not just by the subject under study or the rules of the discipline but also their self-location as subjects. What is necessary and possible is to situate clearly at the outset how the researcher is located with respect to the contexts they study and how research directions maybe guided from the way in which subjects respond to researchers' presence. This is also because of the political and ideological problems that arise from 'studying as other' a 'socio-cultural sub universe of ones' own linguistic, national and cultural environment' is even more complex and inescapable (Pina-Cabral 1987:716).

As a middle class Indian woman from the capital city, I have grown up in a social milieu where rural and tribal lives were understood, either as quaint regressions and idyllic subjects of nationalist literature and propaganda or anachronistic places filled with poverty and primitivism to be inevitably swept aside by modernization. Later I

became familiar with sympathetic but equally elitist notions that would interweave ideas of pristine environment with the innate wisdom and vulnerability of the adivasi life to be contrasted with the destruction and violence of modernity. It was possibly the latter viewpoint that uses rural realities as an instrument to criticise rampant modernization that had taken me to work in the development projects in western Orissa in 1997. Over time my first-hand experience of Orissa had raised concerns and outrage about the extent of poverty and fragmented my ideas of pristine primitive. Eventually it was the deep dissatisfaction with development interventions and the firm belief that local perceptions about their lives were more than quaint stories to be scribbled on the margins of project reports or shaped into images of horror for popular media that had initiated this research. However the subject of poverty as the main theme of this research emerged, not directly from my research questions but from the responses of village people of Mahulkonda to my presence.

Research Methodologies

1.11 Village Entry

Obtaining entry into the village without an outsider-identity that was familiar and acceptable to village people was not easy. In Mahulkonda and its neighbourhood socially unrelated outsiders were viewed either as government representatives or unscrupulous traders out to cheat innocent villagers. I was often taken to be the former in my initial days, despite my vehement denials. But since I did not speak the refined Oriya of the coastal areas, but a broken version of the local Sambalpuri (which had improved greatly as my stay progressed), I was treated better than I would have. Western Orissa people nursed deep antipathy towards officials from coastal Orissa (Katkiyas) who had ruled and looked down on them for decades.⁵

Still in the early days of fieldwork, I was often regaled with a particular story about an agricultural extension worker who had come to live in Mahulkonda twenty years ago. The said person had distributed improved seeds, used demonstration patches for

⁵ F.G Bailey (1957, 1960) also mentions the antipathy towards Katkiya (people who come from Cuttack) in detail in his ethnography of the Kondhmal, an area to the southeast of Borasambar, also located in highland Orissa.

crop productivity experiments and spoken pure Katkiyas (Oriya). His gold jewellery adorned but sad house bound wife would often call out to village women as they went about their daily work but never leave the threshold of her house. When his tenure came to an end, this employee had left the region with large number of local 'gifts' including furniture made of the local Teak. Mahulkonda villagers loved to describe how he had been murdered a few days later in his 'own country' without enjoying even for a day, his newly acquired possessions. I had interpreted the story as a warning: to strangers and outsiders, who inevitably exploited the village and its inhabitants that they were unlikely to prosper from their ill-gotten gains. No doubt I had been categorised with these clever and enterprising outsiders who have periodically appeared as the representative of the state to their remote place.

My initial days at the village had coincided with an on-going government survey about Below Poverty Line families (BPL). Not surprisingly I had been swamped by conversations about poverty. People who wished to have their families included in the list wanted to know when I would begin 'my survey'. Better off village people would accost me to remark sarcastically on their poverty compared to city people and distant places where I may have come from. But as I spent more time in the village, I realised that in contrast to the constant talk about general poverty, people were in reality extremely reticent when it came to describing gruelling and unending personal hardship of everyday life. Admission of poverty reduced one, a shameful acceptance that diminished social standing. Talking about poverty was even more difficult than talking about livelihood, since people were unwilling to discuss personal hardship. Throughout my fieldwork, I was constantly being directed towards simpler adivasi villages – places with something worth studying or backward enough to need development assistance and this was somehow influential in my preoccupation with the definition of being adivasi as defined locally and this theme appears constantly in this thesis. But did one gather information in a context where so much of what the external researcher seeks rest in the domain of the implicit and therefore left unsaid. As Gavin Smith (1989:234) writes: 'gathering data related to livelihood was far more difficult than acquiring material on land invasions. So much was taken for granted.'

1.12 Participant – Observation

Fieldwork was carried out between July 2002 and August 2003 in Mahulkonda (pseudonym), located in the drought prone sub-division of Padampur, in the district of Bargarh, Orissa.⁶ From 1849-1961, the Padampur sub-division was the zamindari of Borasambar (2178 sq. km), administered by the British Sambalpur district. In the fieldwork area people still tend to describe themselves as the people of Borasambar. Most inhabitants were small-scale cultivators who also depended on wage labour, forests and seasonal migration for their livelihoods. I lived for a period of eleven months, in Mahulkonda and visited eight other villages. It was a difficult drought year for the people as monsoon rains failed between July and September, the principle agricultural season. Long hours were spent with individual and groups of men and women in their specific work areas, homes, fields, forests, local markets, panchayat meetings or as they worked at looms, at oil presses, government food for work sites, cooked their meals, planted and harvested crops or cut grass for the cattle. I participated in social and lifecycle events, marriages, births and death ceremonies. I witnessed celebrations, political events, quarrels and accidents and most importantly the prolonged seasonal distress of the drought year that people took so much for granted. While accompanying village women and men on their visits to relatives or moneylenders, I became familiar with neighbouring villages and landscapes. I discovered intricacies of land leasing and borrowing, relationships of exchange, about subjects that were significant for people, things they rather would not discuss and events that provoked anger.

Histories and gossips about family feuds and tussles over land and stories of transgression were shared. Especially common themes were rag to riches and riches to rag stories, through which people voiced their opinion about order, morality and rightful conduct. Through these a pattern emerged of the local social structure as people voiced their identity claims, acted appropriately and articulated often their understanding of where I should be located or how I should act. I was assisted initially by a young Binjhal man (who was recommended by village people) to conduct village surveys in the initial month. But being in many ways a gender

⁶ Total population of the administrative block where Mahulkonda is situated is 79335, M: 39794, F: 39541, ST: 15758, SC: 11871, 102 villages, 354.93 sq. km (geographical area), 19258 households. Binjhal Population in Bargarh district is 71610. (2001 Census, GOI) Bargarh district is known for its multi purpose irrigation project and few industries: handloom textile, cement, sugar mills and rice mills. Bargarh district was carved out of Sambalpur district in 1993.

segregated society the most invaluable assistance came from women with whom I could spend a considerable amount of time and from whom I learnt the dialect, songs, proverbs and other subtleties and nuances of local lives in less formal and uninhibited way. It was easier for me to participate in women's work, the endless gruelling small tasks that they performed related to collecting, gleaning, processing, harvesting, provided spaces to strike up or continue threads of conversation and also to attempt a belonging that was difficult elsewhere.

As fieldwork progressed from observation to detailed conversation and interviews, my position shifted subtly. I became a familiar-curiosity. Village people suggested relationships appropriate for my status. Sometimes older women would justify my role and presence to their neighbours, relatives and visiting government functionaries. The role that I eventually played was that of a 'village daughter'. This was greatly removed from how I had been represented and viewed initially by villagers as a distant, strange and powerful intermediary of the state. Abu-Lughod (1993) mentions the back and forth between the role of a 'dutiful daughter' to identify oneself with the highly patriarchal configuration of the host Bedouin families. Similarly I often found myself entangled against my wishes by the caste and gender prejudices and politics, political leanings and more esoteric witchcraft beliefs of village people. When people insisted that I enter into the web of social relations and take a position appropriate to my status, many implicit facets of local social world became apparent.

1.13. Open ended Interviews

My principal informants were older non-literate men and women. They had a broader grasp of how things had changed from the past and were less inhibited. I conducted long open-ended interviews with both the small farming and labouring people as well as the sahkars and especially women. My association with the Binjhals and other working poorer people in the village meant that, the majority of my interviewees were people of these groups, many of whom remembered their fathers as working for sahkars as attached farm workers. Collecting many life story accounts was one way in which I tried to match individual concerns with broader events. Most people feared committing themselves to a recorded testimony, worrying about its usage and most

conversations had to be hand written later. Tracing land disputes and listening to people struggling to fit genealogical evidence to land sharing issues, became one of the objectives as more and more village people shared and discussed such stories, always seeking arbitration and an external opinion. By asking people to reflect upon specific incidents and events from the past (Bryman 2001), connected to land and livelihood I was able to obtain a broad understanding of how people identified the constraints and shaped their expectations on the basis of past experiences.

My interaction with women of all class and caste groups was more successful. Also being a woman it was considered more socially appropriate to spend time with women. As they tended to form a highly articulate and assertive section of the village population and less preoccupied than men by issues of 'secular prestige', there were no hindrances in discussions about poverty. Indeed some of the conversations I had with women in confessional mode created minor crisis in households. Village was a mine house of kin disputes, land related trouble and factional rivalries, I tried to carefully map out my interaction to avoid siding with anyone side in particular. This was difficult as I was constantly asked to take sides, even arbitrate or predict the results of such disputes. I was often unable to maintain this because of the nature of enquiry and possibilities of information gathering. People easily talked about the poverty of others, neighbours, ancestors but never about their own predicaments. I paid particular attention to the themes of accusations, blame and rights in the gossips, rumours, stories that organize memories of past prosperity and causes for present decline. Rumours and gossip as Luise White suggests are wonderful historical sources because they occupy the interstices of respectability and follow the contours of local and regional concerns (2000:62).

1.14. A Village Survey

My enquiries began with familiarising myself with the village households by undertaking a small quantitative survey, a village census. People expected a variety of surveyors to descend on their village, collecting data on poverty, crops insurance; they expected me to conduct surveys. For me, a preliminary survey had seemed to be the best way to meet every household in the village and start a dialogue. While a research assistant from the village asked the main questions and filled in the forms. I

had focussed on listening and at times encouraging the answers and responses that were not immediately apparent as relevant to the question asked. It was these copious scribbling and note takings during the survey process that helped to select broad themes and people for future interaction and subjects that were especially important to people and about which they were willing to hold long discussions.

1.15. Archival Work

Village people use temporal comparisons to describe their present. Often the past crept inadvertently into village conversations as they recalled long dead ancestors and battles fought and forgotten. Some of these fragments of the past, oral traditions and family histories formed the basis of the archival work that I conducted at the end of the fieldwork period. I examined both textual evidence preserved by the descendants of headman family such as court notices and record of rites as well as oral traditions. This enquiry took me to four other villages, mostly where Mahulkonda people had affinal ties and well as tracing the past by looking for records. I conducted archival research in old district head quarters where I consulted the village record of rights drawn in the early twentieth century. I supplemented this work with looking at zamindari related records in the state capital and later at the India office library in the UK.

1.16. Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of ethnographic and historical narratives with total of 9 chapters. After this introductory and theoretical chapter (Chapter 1), comes chapter 2 that provides a detailed account of the principle fieldwork village, and the social structure and position of different categories and groups of people. The chapter show how the Binjhals rarely connected their experiences and interests to form a critique of the broader hierarchical system, how elite representations and identity politics,

especially promote voluntaristic rather than structural explanations of economic disadvantage and how the evaluation of inequalities among ordinary Binjhals underscore their accommodation as well as vehement refusal of aspects of 'dominant ideologies.' Chapter 3 juxtaposes the narratives of kingship among impoverished villagers with historical analysis of the inception of colonial rule in the forest areas of inland Orissa. It focuses on a particular historical event, the inception of colonial rule and the subsequent demilitarisation of the hill-forest areas and how dissidence became irrelevant or lost moral force and the forms of new solidarities that were established between local elites and the colonial state. An important feature of village poverty and social hierarchy is unequal access to land and disputes reveal the various ways in which rights over land are conceptualized and claims made over this resource. Chapter 4 discusses how such claims not only reflect the contemporary necessities but also enable the historical tracing of changes in legal principles, local political institutions and land use that were introduced during the colonial period leading to the modification of village institutions of land control and introduction of different land use practises in a hitherto remote and forested place.

Poverty meanings are related to the inability to farm or to grow symbolically important and economically valuable crops. Chapter 5 traces the patterns of the agricultural activities including the differentiation that emerged through the expansion of cultivation from the late nineteenth century guided by local enterprise and colonial prejudice about 'aboriginal' farming. 'Being Hungry' is used as a metaphor of past poverty, using which people assess their present improved lives and through which they discuss perceived changes in consumption styles. Chapter 6 analyzes how contemporary nature of consumption continues to reflect great insecurities, inadequacies and shortages that despite the dominant rhetoric about the end of hunger. The processes of the nineteenth century had forced large numbers of erstwhile forest dwellers and descendants of nomadic herdsmen into the ranks of agricultural wageworkers, people who were completely dependent on selling their labour power for subsistence. Chapter 7 describes and analyzes the conditions of agricultural wage work in the Borasambar village and why village people viewed past labouring conditions in terms of servitude and the present in terms of improvement. Chapter 8 seeks to provide a gendered perspective on rural poverty based on the preoccupations of women, their particular roles and concerns and how poverty

specifically affects their lives. This chapter has also tried to demonstrate how the social construction and conceptions of gender have changed with time without remedying or settling issues of the past as people adopted newer symbols to accommodate and come to terms with their identities and locations within wider social spheres. Chapter 9 provides the concluding arguments.

Chapter 2: Clearing Forests, Carrying Earth: Social identities and Subordination

For an external observer forests were a predominant feature of the ex-zamindari of Borasambar. Visiting government official from deltaic Orissa remarked upon the primitive culture and dialects of the locals connecting it with the forests and adivasi people. Development sector employees marvelled at brilliantly forested landscape or drew attention to the autonomous cultures and ecologically sustainable practices of adivasi dwellers of forests. While Western Orissa villagers too described their region and social world as being situated in the jharpat (forest area); they hastened to emphasize how it had been gradually and laboriously emerging from this state through the agency of its inhabitants who had cleared tree stumps and carried earth to make their fields and villages.

Social status was asserted by village people through contested claims about the kinds of role that lineages, families and groups had played in making a dangerous place, productive and habitable. Often, the Binjhals described as adivasi were cast as the protagonists of the discarded left-behind forested-past, while dominant social groups, were credited with bringing civilization. Binjhal counter-narratives about self and others questioned the legitimacy of these claims by asserting not the superior or distinctive attributes of forest as against farmed places but highlighting the pioneering role of their ancestors; zamindars and headmen in settling the villages of Borasambar.

My point here is not to establish that village expressions were a cultural variant of or response to dominant external discourses about forests in India but to understand how distinctions and classifications of social categories were connected with specific histories and experiences of the locality that produced and validated the understandings of social hierarchies and identities. The objective of this chapter is to introduce the social landscape of the principal fieldwork village Mahulkonda, in Borasambar and discuss how conceptions of identities emerged from claims and

counter-claims of villagers, grounded in the histories of village settlement. By examining these identity-claims about self and others, it is possible to understand the past and present structure of the society and the contradictions in local identities linked to the transformation of forest areas to farming units. Being adivasi was associated with the diminished social status and economic poverty of Binjhals but Binjhals rejected such demeaning ascriptions by providing alternate interpretations of their situation, explanations and experiences that can be used as a pivot to enable the closer analysis of the specific locally relevant causes of the emergence of devalued and valuable social positions relative to forest and farms, in the local agrarian field.

Mahulkonda villagers were divided into various jati groups and their material and meaningful existence rested upon the patchwork of interdependent relationships with each other in ways that broadly resembled the divisions, hierarchies and symbolic practises of mainstream rural Indian society.⁷ However understanding the subjective and objective dimensions of rural hierarchy requires the analysis of the term adivasi in the local society. Groups like the Binjhals identified themselves and were identified by others not just as a jati but also as being adivasi. It has been standard practise in anthropology to treat adivasi as separate and distinct groups from jati (or caste) based on their different social organisation and distinctive cultural practises. But in Borasambar, groups categorized as adivasi and those labelled simply as jati, had relational identities since they lived in nested, overlapping and continuous social formations (Bailey 1957, 1960, Vitebsky 1993). Being adivasi, for the Binjhals is best understood not as an effect of longstanding competition between various jati groups but through a more complex understanding of pre-colonial social stratification that framed the structural shifts in the local society during the colonial era administrative interventions in the zamindari. Binjhals had been ruled by their raja in the nineteenth century and their society had comprised of stratified lineages. The Binjhal zamindar had not only retained his privileged status but had become exceptionally powerful during the colonial period by adapting and committing himself to agrarian expansion and religious transformation of forested Borasambar and to this effect had promoted

⁷ However as scholars of Orissa have pointed out, neither a Brahman centric conception (Dumont 1998) nor the king-dominant caste approach (Raheja 1988), works well for the rural Orissa (Lerche 1992, Bailey 1957, 1960).

the entry and settlement of cultivators and Brahmans through grants and sale of land.⁸ To some extent Binjhals had participated in this process through their occupation and roles as holders of services and tenures in the zamindari. And it was only when these privileged position crucial to land control were farmed/leased/sold to jati groups other than the Binjhals, that the community began a gradual shift downwards relative to others in the society. Ordinary Binjhals often summoned their kinship with the ex-zamindar to counter dominant ascriptions of social inferiority but they also admitted ruefully their evident social and economic distance from the zamindar: *'among us adivasis, one would be king but the rest; they would be paupers.'* Being adivasi for the Binjhals meant poverty that came through displacement from position associated with power and status of kingship and their occupation of symbolically devalued positions in the local society. For others, being adivasi simply implied the occupation of symbolically subordinate positions and embodying its related attributes that underpinned and justified poverty in the regional society.

In the eastern villages of Borasambar (including the fieldwork village of Mahulkonda), the Binjhals were subordinated through their landless-ness and dependence on agricultural labouring and special position as the priests of earth and forest spirits.⁹ The latter situated them metaphorically towards the less prestigious end of the farm-forest continuum, both less remunerative and less divine under the Brahmanical spectrum (Babb 1975). Pollution beliefs 'buttressed by the power of the agrarian rich' (Gupta 2005:417) served as 'idioms of subordination' (Mosse 1996:462) to justify the ritually inferior position of the Binjhals in this society. Most Binjhals attributed their social status strictly to their economic poverty derived from their dependence on scarce and depleted forest fields and low income labouring in the context of agrarian landlessness. Binjhal identity expressions were shaped by their longstanding relationships and exchanges with jati groups and ranged from mild criticisms about

⁸ 'The chief alteration of the aboriginal society was its division into the hinduised and the others, with the former coming to dominate the latter through service tenures and office. Further rural hierarchy was introduced by the rajas who appointed revenue farmers and favoured Brahmins and Rajputs with land grants.' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 86).

⁹ In the western villages of the ex-zamindari of Borasambar, the Binjhals lived within an order based on their own stratified lineages and exogamous clans and approached closer to the standard definition of adivasi community (Panda 2005).

dominant jati groups being merely sahumars or moneylenders to vehement anti-brahmanism in forest villages to historical narratives of a glorious past woven from memories of kingship and priesthood.¹⁰ Binjhal villagers' conceptions about material and moral necessities were also filtered through their interactions with their own community elites and their 'representational strategies' (Hall 1996:293) that propagated distancing from forest related practises of the Binjhals while preserving and revising selected traditions of the past to build group solidarity, press for state recognition and succeed in electoral politics.

2.1 Description of the Fieldwork Village:

When I arrived for my fieldwork in Mahulkonda village travelling from the state capital located on the deltaic plains of coastal Orissa, across limitless stretches of flat inundated paddy fields moving towards hill country, on a dust filled month in end-July in 2002, like many outsiders, it was the presence of trees and the apparent absence of farms that had struck me. Especially prominent was the majestic Mahul, its curling, twisting branches, the dark green leaves outlined magnificently against the dusty yellow of the un embanked uplands overgrown with herbs, shrubs, thorns and grasses of Date, Jujube, Bamboo, Fig, Char, Sahaj and Kendu or the Indian Ebony. The verdure, created a deceptive impression. The farmers were bracing themselves for another drought season. July is usually the heaviest rain month in these parts, but in 2002 it did not start raining before end-August. To reach Mahulkonda it was necessary to take a small side road from Tentelmuda, a typical roadside village with the usual shops, that sold eggs, bananas, packets of biscuits, bars of soap and doubled as motor vehicle lubricant oil and makeshift petrol filling stops for the rag-tag bunch of vehicles that ply the road between, administrative headquarter towns. The side road that went southwards to interior villages was part newly metalled road and partly dirt track, lined on both sides by the abrupt up and down land that was not even remotely suggestive of agriculture outside the single crop season; the ek-khed agriculture of Borasambar. Beyond the uplands were the isolated forest covered

¹⁰ Binjhals social position in eastern Borasambar villages followed a trajectory that resembled the situation of groups such as the Valaiyars, who were incorporated both socio-economically and ritually incorporation into an expanding agricultural ecosystem as landless agricultural laborers, lords of the forest and priests of protection situated between the untouchables and caste Hindus (Dirks 1987:273).

hills, in the foreground, rapidly succeeding visions of nested ecosystems: groves of tree, patches of forests and occasional rice paddies. Along the winding paths of dried hill streams and high banks of the triangular three sided tanks, walked women, with their graceful, swinging gait in identical attire, blue-green saris and one sided hair buns (distinctive throughout western Orissa hill country) seemingly indifferent to their heavy loads as they went about their work in the farm and forest and markets. Older men with the long rolled up Rengal leaf cigarettes (kahali) tucked behind their ears or in their top knotted hair – walked slowly always a tangia (axe) slung casually on their shoulders. The place was submerged in deep silences broken by birdcalls, the rhythmic sound of the dhenki (rice-husker), hum of cicadas and a fragrance of fermented rice from the steaming rice paddies. To me it had appeared as a world that was remote, wrapped without doubt in the distinctive traditions of the forest, evoking the adivasi rather than plains societies.

Mahulkonda village was described by the locals as an average or in-between place compared to its neighbouring villages, less cultivated but more forested than Telipalli, more factional but less forested than Kamlapadar, less quarrelsome but better cultivated than Gidhmal, more educated but not united like Kondagar, very backward agriculturally compared to the resource rich villages further east towards Bargarh khalsa and peaceful compared to the lawless Patna (Bolangir district) towards the south. Like most other villages of Borasambar cultivation and education were the two important preoccupations of villagers and their livelihoods were determined by the economic base of the village in terms of the extent of fertile and level land. Some villages people said were simply located more advantageously than others. In the words of a Binjhal woman, *'bigger villages had greater wisdom'*.

Mahulkonda was an unusually elongated village that consisted of two long and parallel rows of houses situated symmetrically on either side of the village street, a dirt track that stretched for 2 km. People had fuzzy memories of more dispersed settlement consisting of isolated temporary houses amidst fields and forests in the distant past. At day break and dusk, village cattle thundered down the street, as they were collected from and returned to each household by appointed cowherds to be grazed collectively in the pasture on the southern end of the village. Through the day women walked up and down on their way to the village baoli (drinking water well) or

the bar kata (big tank) balancing two brass gadias or head loads of fuel wood. Men walked to the fields or cycled to work, jam packed village jeeps ferried people to the market on appointed days; thrice a week, an occasional motorbike zooming down the road managed to attract a great deal of attention.

Village common area (gaon khoul) was visibly marked by the rhythms of the season. During rain months, people had no time to pause and chat as they hurried from task to task. In the harvest months that began from early autumn men and women carried bundles of Mung and Biri beans to be dried and threshed at home. Later for the rice harvest, most people were away at their fields. Harvest seasons were punctuated with festivals, when the house fronts were cleaned, painted and decorated, and special greetings were exchanged when people met each other and parts of the village hummed with politically sponsored loudspeaker music. Winter brought the end of the agricultural season with feasts and gift exchange. With spring came the marriage season, when the house front verandas (pirhas) were occupied by the village musicians and a steady stream of women carrying small baskets of gifts could be seen visiting. Similar gift bearing processions also marked the births and deaths in village families. In the summer long before daybreak silent groups of women left for the forest while and men left for wage work carrying the spades and sling baskets. Then, the long silent afternoons would be permeated with the scent of yellow drying mahul flowers. By evening, the street would burst into tense activity, crowds of men much denser than other times of the year, huddling outside the liquor shop and women haggling bitterly over small purchases or credit with the traders. In summer, it was common for differences between people and within families to spill over and the palpable stress in the air broke only with the coming of the rains and beginning of the new agricultural season. Lives of Mahulkonda people like their neighbours were implicitly tied to the rhythms of the agrarian-forest cycle.

Most village houses were unassuming, identical earthen constructions with tiled roofs, interspersed with a few un-plastered brick houses. The few two storied concrete houses adorned with television antennae and sometimes with flowerpots stood out, anomalous and aggressive. Some of the concrete houses were of humble origin, the result of government housing scheme known as 'colony ghar' in the village, others were the signs of old and new wealth. Most people lived in the old

style earthen dwellings; the honey combed ancestral quarters shared by several families from the same lineage or jama. At first glance these had neither windows nor doors opening outwards into the village street. Instead the entry was through a narrow passage from the street, which opened into a square common courtyard. Around this common courtyard were the rooms allocated to the separate hearth groups and sometimes one or two cattle sheds. Most families had only one or two small rooms as living space. Outside, facing the street, were the raised platform called *pirha* sheltered by the sloping roof. Here the men sat and conversed, calling out to the passer byes, playing cards, holding small agitated discussions, gram sabha meetings and 'nyay' panchayats to settle disputes, where itinerant traders and artisans conducted their business and the anganwadi-worker (government run child health program) cooked and distributed a small snack for children every morning. Behind the houses, on the eastern and western flanks of the village, were the fenced gardens called *Bari*, containing brick lined wells, beyond which spread out the agricultural fields, in broad, undulating terraces. Strips of forests marked the boundary between Mahulkonda fields and the fields of the neighbouring villages towards the west and the south. The village jore (seasonal stream), whose sandy bed could be crossed easily in summer, made a natural boundary towards the east.

While Mahulkonda residents viewed themselves as the people of Borasambar, a 'community' with a historically shared way of life (contrasting it with city dwellers or people from other linguistic regions, or wheat-eaters or 'educated people'), they were also quick to point out the distinctions and differences within them based on jati, gender, occupation as well as wealth and poverty. While 12 jati groups lived in Mahulkonda, their presence was not reflected in the physical arrangement of localities or houses. The settlement pattern was defined through the house sites of the various agnatic lineages (jama) and people from different castes were contiguous neighbours. Only the para of the dalit (they described themselves as harijan) and weavers lay on a side street, opening out to the western fields on the edge of what used to be the densest patch of forest in living memory (presently state reserve forest). The harijans as dalits were known in the village, even though some of them had the money to buy house sites in the new settlement opening out towards the northern and southern ends of the village, would not be sold land there and were therefore restricted to their crowded ancestral house sites. On the mouth of the lane

leading to the harijan para (areas) stood a flowering tree with its cement bounded circular seat and a few large rocks at the base where a sacrificed pig's head was buried to propitiate troublesome spirits, in the month of September.

Apart from the space that cordoned off the house-sites of the harijan jama, there were other markers in the village settlement that indicated areas of power and ritual significance. In the approximate centre of the eastern row of houses, was the mahaprabhu gudi or the temple dedicated to lord Jagannath, the principal deity and a symbol of united Hindu Orissa since the late 1800 (Kulke 2001). The deity was rarely found in the goddess centric villages of Borasambar. The temple was a small concrete structure that was built in 1956 on land donated by a wealthy cultivator, and managed by the purohit (Brahman priest). Other places of ritual significance were the gudi of Bastrein budi and Buda Raja that was located away from habitation in a grove of silk cotton trees on the northern fields where the jhankar (Binjhal priest) sacrificed goats to these powerful village debtas. The first, a Binjhal ancestress was associated with earth and fertility, the second, an ancient king riding a white horse ensured the protection of boundaries. A small temple dedicated to Shiva was situated on the bank of the village tank where a priest from the Mali caste offered worship and hosted the processions of the local snake-worshipping cult (nag-bachas) congregating there every year during the rains.

As though to suggest the close connection between the temporal and spiritual centres, the house of the village headman (gountia) family, (well known and sometimes criticised in the village for their excessive devoutness to vaishnavism and neglect of urgent material necessities of villagers), was located appropriately beside the Jagannath temple. It had been partitioned between the branches of the family. The grander two-storied cement house adorned with a satellite dish belonged to the younger brother, a school principal, towered over the humbler mud-brick and tile old fashioned house of the elder, marking the differences in wealth and status among brothers, a common idiom of expressing grievance in the village. Across the street, from the gountia's house lived wealthy Brahman families who represented competing centres of power. Next doors lived the humbler Keunt families (confectioners) on whose pirha (porch), a huge pot of paddy boiled night and day for making puffed rice. The Binjhal jama that represented the old headman lineage (juna-gountia jama)

lived further up north in the eastern row of houses, towards the entry point of the village. Next to and right across the street from the house of the old headman lineage were located the rival power centres of the village, in the shape of two of the wealthiest jama of the Kultha cultivator castes. Other village families of different caste groups lived in crowded courtyard-houses on sites that had been acquired by their jama-ancestors depending on what had been available when they had arrived in the village. Extensions had emerged, at the northern and southern ends of the settlement, beyond the banyan and tamarind tree clumps that marked the old borders. Families that had moved out to these more spacious houses were heterogeneous in terms of caste and economic status, consisting of families that could afford to buy agricultural land to build new house sites and those building temporary huts on government (sarkari) owned wasteland or family owned fields. Demographic pressure was making it difficult for village people to persist in the old jama houses but since most of the land including much of the original pasture was needed for cultivation, house-sites were rare commodity.

A majority of Mahulkonda villagers were small or large cultivators, farming the up and down agricultural land. The sloping 'at' and high 'mal' (uplands) constituted a greater proportion of agricultural fields, while the valley bottom 'bahal' were fewer in number.¹¹ Fields were dotted with the fenced khola or barns, where hay was stacked. These barns were like small oases in summer with their small wells, lemon and guava trees and patches of gourd, flat beans and pumpkins. While the most important crop was rice, a variety of legumes and oilseeds were grown in mixed stands on upland fields. When the agricultural season came to an end in January, the village cattle were allowed to pasture freely in the fields covered with paddy stalks and other stubble till the next kharif, July. Farmers benefitting from the manure often requested the herdsmen to use their fields to herd. Many small gardens of vegetables that were planted and tended in summer required close supervision against marauding cattle. Mahulkonda villagers have witnessed increases in crop yields due to adoption of improved seed varieties aided by the irrigation from a minor irrigation project on the village stream. Previously the only irrigation available was from the village tank or bor Kota, large three-sided tanks, common in all villages and

¹¹ The a in ant and mal sounds like the a in 'after'. The first 'a' in bahal sounds like: the first 'a' in 'awake', the second a sounds like 'after'. The 'o' in Khola and Kota, sounds like the 'o' in orange

used to exclusively serve the village headman or gountia's bahal fields. An old regional tradition of digging semi-permanent wells in the fields to irrigate summer gardens of vegetables had been continued in Mahulkonda. Prosperous farmers rued that the character of groundwater was unsuitable for more intensive well-based irrigation practised successfully by some in the neighbouring village.

Most Mahulkonda villagers were farmers for only half the year. After the kharif harvests, the upland fields took on the appearance of scrub forests and wherever possible enabled to do so. Farmers and farm workers carefully tended the natural growth of kendu (tendu in Chattisgarh and MP) bushes and left wherever possible the growth of the mahul trees (mahua in central and eastern India). These trees and vegetation served as important source of income during spring and summer. It is believed that such trees unlike crops could not be planted but must be allowed to spread. Most trees were on privately owned fields and claimed by specific families. Trees in the common areas including state forests were technically accessible to all villagers within the vicinity. Apart from mahul, villagers collected a variety of other forest products, the berries of the char, mangoes, hill broom and tree-gum. These were arduous tasks with low returns and required long treks to distant forests and gleaning from commons of many villages. In recent years, the forest season had been augmented with seasonal migration of work parties to the canal irrigated villages of Bargarh district and the rice or cash for work employment generation projects by the state all over the sub-division.

Despite the sense of rural timelessness, Mahulkonda villagers described and debated vociferously the nature of changes that their area had witnessed in the recent past. The improvement perceived as the increasing use of commodities earlier associated with city people or wealthy Brahman households. The ceiling fans, television sets, gas or electric stoves for cooking, refrigerators, motor cycles, city style clothes, shoes, wrist watches, concrete houses and bank accounts are viewed not just as the status and prestige of individual families but as progress or unnati of the village. These have edged out previously held conceptions of wealth symbolised by the huge granaries, hoards of gold and silver jewellery and the number of farm servants one could employ. In 2002, eight grocery shops, a kerosene dealership and a licensed liquor shop had sprung up in the village in response to migrant wage

incomes unlike twenty years when the itinerant women traders could fulfil all village needs. Villagers also attributed their sense of progress from the increasing levels of literacy among young men and women from subordinate caste groups and that some of the highly prized but scarce non-farm, white collared jobs had been obtained through state reservation policies. That the newly constructed concrete house of a person from the Saonra adivasi-caste who worked for BSF (Border Security Force), was as imposing in proportion as the village gountia's house was a source both of pride and consternation among villagers. And there were many such examples. However since dominant caste groups had a head start in benefitting from education and state policies, such changes did not mark radical social transformation. The sense of changing times had emerged not just from the ability of subordinate groups to emulate the high status life-styles of city people but also from the widespread perception that the state (sarkar), akin to the distant benevolent king though impeded greatly by its corrupt emissaries was on the side of the poor.

It is possible that the sense of wellbeing or progress derived to some extent from the perceived decline in power and strength of the wealthy headman and sahuakar families of the past. At the same time the decline of power in these centres have produced the sense of moral disorder and disunity. Although Mahulkonda was an important village, its inability to produce a sar-panch or become a panchayat village, were attributed to the rivalries between the many factions controlled by the fragmented power centres of the village and compounded by recently prosperous self- serving individuals. This situation popular opinion felt hampered their ability to attract development resources. As an example they pointed out the high school constructed and run by villagers since the late 1980s that was yet to obtain state recognition or funds. Moreover, the panchayat head quarters, post office, primary health centre, veterinary doctor, police stations, rice husking mills, medicine shops and weekly markets were located in neighbouring villages. The hospital, court, bank, sub-divisional magistrate's office and colleges were located in Padampur, 28 km away from Mahulkonda. The absence of infrastructure was attributed to the comparatively interior location of Mahulkonda. Sometimes people blamed their forested location and disposition for these shortcomings.

A half circle of forests framed the southern and western boundary of the village. A smaller patch of forest bordered the northern side, a monoculture attributed to the soil conservation department. The densest patch was on the western flank of the village and was classified as state reserve forest. Very few large or valuable timber trees were present in the reserve forest and the only fauna apart from birds, termites and snakes were the occasional squirrel, bat, rabbit, fox and the monitor lizard. Older people remembered a forest that was filled with magnificent, economically valuable and ritually important trees, rengal, beeja-saal, sahaj¹², dhaura, kendu, kau and dumer and populated by numerous species of animals: foxes, panthers, bears, sambhar deer and wild boars that caused widespread depredation of crops and attracted hunt parties in summer. Indeed in popular memory Borasambar zamindari was famous for its 'kheda' (chase) by which villagers described how they were summoned as beaters in hunt parties. Forests were also places associated with special rites and activities such as hunting and dancing, gleaning and gathering and with fearsome though not always malevolent spirits. Discourses about the diminishing forests were filled with ambivalence, connected with unnati (progress) but also inviting nostalgia for the moral and material resources of the past.

Receding forests were an important symbolic marker of the sense of new times in Mahulkonda related to two important changes in the local society such as decreasing dominance of the traditionally wealthy households and the emergence of educated and relatively prosperous households from diverse social categories. The expansion of dominant cultural values of mainstream hinduism among villagers had resulted in the metaphoric extension of civilization over wilderness and re-categorisation of many practises of the elders past and present non-literate men and women as 'adivasi', distinctions superimposed on resilient divisions of jati in the local society. What is of principal concern here is the understanding of local differences and hierarchies based on the differential command over valuable resources obtained through membership of specific social groups and how dominant viewpoints about group identities enabled the justification of group boundaries and social hierarchy.

¹² Beeja sal and sahaj have been reserved species since the forest laws were drawn up in the late nineteenth century (Rangarajan 1996)

2.2 The Social Structure of Mahulkonda: Jati and Jama, Sahukar and Haliya, Gountia and Praja

Spread over 800 acres and inhabited by 270 households (1287 people), Mahulkonda was an average sized village. Most families were cultivators holding dispersed fields of variable size and quality and belonged to specific jati groups. Wealthier farmers and higher status jati groups owned greater shares of the scarce rice growing fields. Inhabitants of Mahulkonda belonged to 14 jati groups. According to the village census (conducted during fieldwork), the distribution of households and population among these jati groups are as follows: Binjhals (75, 211), Goud (46, 206), Haldiya Teli (37, 175), Kultha (30, 169), Kallar (10, 47), Brahman (6, 37), Keunt (13, 60), Teli-pida Teli (15, 61), Saonra (10, 61), Harijan (18, 96), [Dhoba, Luhar, Meher, Barik] (9, 37). Village families can be divided into rich or poor depending on their relationship with land and labour and non-farm income. But these distinctions are not very significant. Big cultivators were those who farmed more than 40 acres of land. Middle cultivators were those who owned 10-20 acres and could subsist in good rainfall years by working on their own land. Families that cultivated less than 10 but more than 5 acres were small farmers, who depended to a considerable extent on labouring for other families. The poorest were those who depended primarily on labouring for others while struggling to cultivate their marginal fields that could range from 0.5 – 5 acres. 80% of village families belonged to the last two categories, while only 2% were among the first group. The criterion of land holding is sometimes applied to determine richer and poorer caste groups. Reflecting the pattern of the wider region, most of the big and middle cultivators tend to be the Kulthas and Brahman. Many Kultha families also occupied the middle and small category along with cultivators from Haldiya Teli and Kallar caste. Several families from the Haldiya Teli and Kallar caste could be found in the poorest category. Binjhal families were among the poorest cultivators and along with the Goud herdsman caste; they were the principal labouring people of Mahulkonda. Landholding size as criteria of wealth or poverty; mattered less in case of families that had a secure source of income from non-farm employment like government service. While in the past these families had belonged to rich cultivator castes, and hence were also large landowners and already powerful

members of the village community, caste groups from the poorer classes were also represented within this category at present. The latter were known as the 'new sahumars' of the village and were aspiring landholders through their greater purchasing power and secure incomes compared to farming families who were subject to impoverishment through their sole dependence on land that was subject to fragmentation and other forms of agrarian pressures.¹³

Village landholding pattern, an important determining criteria of locally understood wealth and poverty, reflects the organization that took place during what is known as the times of the revenue-era and gountia shashan (rule by headman). A quarter of the best agricultural land was fixed as the tax-free share of the gountia (headman) called the 'bhogra' (also known as 'sir') (100 acres) and the rest was demarcated as 'prajati' (300 acres). (Village Record of Rights, Dewar, 1906-1926) The bhogra-land had belonged to the family of Kultha cultivator caste headman from 1942, the Borasambar zamindar between 1917-1941 and prior to that the Binjhal juna- gountia or old headman lineage. After the abolition of zamindari, the Bhogra had been re-classified as 'ryoti' land and was partitioned between the two branches of the new-headman lineage. The praja consisted of the lineages of various caste groups who had arrived at Mahulkonda at various points in time and had successfully staked claim to land through purchase, forest-clearing or grants made by the headman or the zamindar. Except for the Binjhal old headman lineage, all praja families are remembered as migrants. Present village landowning families were the descendants of praja lineages and cultivated shares of the 'prajati' land. Some minor land rights (apart from the gountia's office) originated from caste-specific service grants associated with the period of indirect British rule as follows: tax-free land shares allocated to families of village servants, jhankar (Binjhal priest), nariha (Goud village-servant) and chowkidar (harijan village watchman). Families of the artisanal caste who owned neither prajati land nor service grants were known as the sukhbasi.

¹³ The 1891 census of Sambalpur district had used a brahmanical standard for classifying local social categories. Local caste groups were divided into the following categories: 1) twice born or those who wore the sacred thread: Brahmans, Karans and Rajputs, 2) Higher Cultivators and Higher Artisans (from whom Brahmans accepted food and water) -Kulthas, Gouds 3) Serving Castes from whom Brahmans accepted water, - Kewat 4) Lower Artisans and trading castes -Teli, Kallar 5) Forest Tribes- Binjhar, 6) Impure castes. 950 villages were owned by category 1, pure castes. 492 villages were owned by category 2, 1393 villages were owned by category 5. Binjhar owned villages numbered 487. (Russell 1905:10, table, 4)

The principal landowning families of Mahulkonda emerged from the successful praja and headman lineage. The extent of land controlled by agricultural families was attributed to the relative skills of their ancestors to obtain access to these resources but caste attributes came into play when assessing the success of converting flexible land claims into more durable rights. Mahulkonda Brahman families, like other Brahmans had derived their land from the patronage of the zamindar in the early twentieth century. These jharis or forest Brahmans known for their cultivation skills (and not priestly duties) had also served as zamindari official, traders and moneylenders producing the richer, more educated and politically influential people in Mahulkonda. Through the early twentieth century, the land share of Brahmans had increased significantly and these families had come to control village leadership. Besides the Brahman, the dominant landowning families belonged to the Kultha cultivator caste. Other prominent landowners were people of the Haldiya-Telis, (turmeric traders) and the Kallars (distillers) castes. Although the Teli and Kallar families were among the earlier migrants and had controlled larger shares of land initially, the Kulthas and Brahmans had steadily consolidated and increased their land while the former had struggled to retain their portion. Being the employers of agricultural workers in Mahulkonda, the landowning castes had great influence on village people. Though in recent times, their capacity to employ and control rural labour had declined significantly and interests in agriculture had waned; some families had resuscitated their importance as patrons through attracting government work contracts, development resources and brokering candidates for local elections. Educated and employed Brahman and Kultha men who no longer performed agricultural work, styled themselves as bhadralok, or civilized men as against the murukh, (illiterates or savages), but poorer villagers identified them simply as mahajans and sahuikars (big people and money lenders).¹⁴

¹⁴ Richard Temple, the first commissioner of Central Provinces had remarked upon the absence of significant hierarchy between different caste groups in the local society. 'There are not here, as in some parts of India, particular classes in power and particular classes in subjection; or particular tribes in substantial occupation of large tracts of country. The people here indeed present every variety of tribe and caste mixed up together.' (EuR Mss. Temple 1862:18)

Landless or land-poor lineages worked as farm labourers. Caste groups known primarily by their labouring and dependent roles and statuses were the Binjhals and Gouds (village graziers and cowherds). The Gouds were considered to be a 'pure caste' by dominant landowners, enabling them to work as water carriers and cooks as against the Binjhals who were described as adivasi and associated with the arduous and externalized forest-work such as clearing tree stumps, cutting trees and finding water routes. Other groups that swelled the rank of farm workers included a small number of heterogeneous artisanal and adivasi castes of varying relative statuses such as the Saonra, Keunt, Telpida-Teli, Dhoba, Luhar and Harijan. The status distinctions within these groups varied from the relatively higher status of the Keunt as against the extreme pollution rules applied to the Harijans. Groups such as the Mehers were weavers by profession rarely worked as farm labourers, attributing their inability to perform hard labour to their habituation to delicate work. A few members of all subordinate groups had attained both landed status and wealth through education and government employment in recent times. Such men were viewed as the leading men of specific caste groups but restricted from entry into the informal village council that took important decisions regarding common good. The relationships between the landed and land-poor village families were defined in economic and contractual terms by the latter and through the language of caste-superiority by the former. While agricultural labour was a demeaning occupation, working as the permanent farm servant of specific households indicated greater subordination or poverty. Apart from farm labouring traditional occupations such as herding, scavenging, leatherwork, being musicians or making musical instruments like the drum, oil pressing, being black smiths, washing clothes or cutting hair, were considered to be less prestigious and linked to low caste status.

Archival texts as well as the timing of the local harvest festival (nuakhai) indicate that, in the not so distant past, the agricultural season in western Orissa was considerably short and ended in Dashera (October) instead of Poush (January) as in present times (see Motte 1799). The staple food crop was kudo (millet) rather than the present rice. After bringing home their autumn harvest of upland crops, the Borasambar Binjhals went on their raiding, soldiering and hunting expeditions. In recent time, after bringing home the farmer's harvest, people dependent on farm labour, would live on meagre forest food and starve quietly. Since the extent of

cultivation and hence employment had fluctuated based on the frequency of drought years, people who were without crop stores or labouring wages, found themselves to be destitute. There is no doubt that the cultivated fields and forests of Borasambar had struggled to fulfil the needs of village people for a long time. Migration within the zamindari, had been a way of life for a majority of Binjhals and others subordinate groups whose land was insufficient or of poorer quality. Extent and patterns of migration had changed over time. After a series of drought years in the 1960s, stagnant employment and the declining demand for agricultural labour within Borasambar had pushed labouring people outwards and eastwards towards the dam-irrigated areas of the district.¹⁵ Very few groups including the Binjhals had ventured beyond their cultural region or explored occupations other than farming. From late 1980s, with their migrant incomes some had rejuvenated cultivation in their forest fields. At present agriculture, supported by forestry and seasonal migration for wage labour were the primary sources of livelihood and income for impoverished families. Land fragmentation of large farmers and the waning interest of rural elites in agriculture had opened new spaces for previously and presently labouring families to attain a more respectable status as farmers.

2.3 Being Adivasi: Binjhals of Mahulkonda

The Binjhal number around 118,116, are officially designated as a scheduled tribe and live largely in the ex-zamindari areas of western Orissa and Chattisgarh.¹⁶ The name of the social group Binjhal or Binjwal has undergone transformations in meanings and attributions. In Binjhal traditions they had migrated from Ratanpur, an erstwhile kingdom in Chattisgarh (Bilaspur district). The name may have originated from 'Binjh', the local name of Rewa district in central India and 'wal' meaning

¹⁵ Village people both men and women travel to the canal irrigated belt in the eastern half of the district to work as agricultural workers. 'In 1955 work was completed on the Hirakud dam...5 miles to the northwest of the town of Sambalpur. This dam across the Mahanadi River was designed to control flooding in the Mahanadi valley during the months of heavy rainfall, to provide hydroelectric power for a large area of the state of Orissa and to serve as a source of dry season irrigation water for the surrounding areas. (Fraser 1968:12) Hirakud canal systems irrigated 611 villages in Sambalpur and Bolangir districts and the gross command area is 3,20,000 acres and 2,20,000 acres in Sambalpur and Bolangir districts respectively (Government of Orissa 1968: 178-180, DSHB 1967: 402-403, cited in Baboo 1992: 33).

¹⁶ See 2001 Census, Tribal Census of Orissa.

ancestors. Early gazetteer reports had linked the Binjhals of Borasambar with the Chattisgarhi tribe of the Baiga, shamans and shifting cultivators. This argument was used to emphasize the humble origins of the Binjhals among 'primitive tribes' or aboriginals and diminished their status claims as zamindars (Russell and Hiralal 1916).¹⁷ The Baigas of Chattisgarh had identified the Binjhals of Borasambar as their 'aristocratic brothers' and had described them as a group that had discarded dahi and adopted plough cultivation (Elwin 1986[1939]). The name Bariha that most Binjhals favoured was used in the past only by the zamindar of Borasambar possibly derived from pre-colonial administrative position in the local state-system associated with barah or formations of twelve units (Wills 1919). It is clear that the name as well as the category of the Binjhals has emerged not just from some primordial essence or livelihood characteristic but also through administrative categories and dominant cultural models propagated by state systems and the adaptations and appropriations of these meanings by the Binjhals themselves. The name Binjhal had indicated groups of exogamous clansmen living under their raja in compact hill-forest territories in the early nineteenth century. A century later they were being described as impoverished and aboriginal villagers in administrative writings.

In local tradition Mahulkonda village had been settled and inhabited by Binjhals. But they are associated not with civilization but barbarity. A story told often as if to justify this belief went as follows. In Mahulkonda there was a long stretch of upland called 'Laban Tan' where the villagers cultivated sesame. Once that had been the campsite of the Labans, the itinerant bands of pack bullock merchants who travelled through this area. It is believed that the Binjhal gountia family had massacred and driven them away one night in a fit of rage after some drunken traders had failed to show respect. The barbarism of the Binjhals of the past is linked with their ritual inferiority and economic subordination in the village society. Kultha, Brahman and Haldiya-Teli cultivators as well as the impoverished Goud herdsmen and Teli Oil pressers did not accept food or water from the Binjhals. As though to crystallize their appropriate place in the social hierarchy, the village meaning of the name Binjhal had become a pejorative, 'Bin'-'jhalo' or 'those who don't sweat' citing the innate capacity of the Binjhal farm workers for performing arduous labour such as cutting trees and

¹⁷ In northern Orissa, the term Baiga simply implied positions of shamanic priests that could be occupied by any jati with claims of original occupation of an area (DeBrett 1909, Cobden-Ramsay 1910).

carrying earth. But Binjhal marginality was not a self-evident reality but was heralded by their loss of specific forms of land control. I will discuss the political circumstances of Binjhal land control in the zamindari past in chapter 3 and the historical processes around the changing meaning and distribution of land rights in chapter 4. The objective here is to trace the economic circumstances of Binjhal villagers through their relative lack of land control that made their incorporation and subordination within the local society real and meaningful.

The Binjhals of Mahulkonda belonged to 75 nuclear-family households. These households described as ghar usually consisted of a married couple with children, who shared a hearth and ate together. More than one ghar sometimes jointly cultivated land and shared labour and living space. The nuclear-family units were also related to 8 different agnatic-lineages or jama groups. Each jama group tended to reside in one section of the basti (settlement) and their ancestral or inherited fields were located in a compact section (jama-bhag) of the village agricultural landscape. As the Persian word 'jama' suggests, these kin-groups were also revenue-paying units in the past. From the settlement of the revenue village (1870-1917), the village headman or gountia had been a Binjhal. Families related through the male line to this lineage group were known as juna-gountia (old-headman) jama. Binjhal gountia lineage represented the earliest habitation of the village and their land was by tradition the first portion to have been brought under cultivation through forest clearing activities aided by kinsmen and dependents.

According to Binjhal stories, Mahulkonda was part of an inam (reward) grant to a family of Binjhals by the zamindar of Borasambar. In the past this had involved the rights to collect malikana and malguzari from the inhabitants of a cluster of twelve pallis (hamlets). Selected members of the Binjhal headman family not only collected revenue but also officiated as village priests conducting various agricultural, earth and forest rites. When the Binjhal jama lost the headman-ship position in 1917, their lineage lost the rights over a considerable amount of village land that they cultivated as a 'home-farm' as well as the economic and symbolic powers that came from allocation of outlying forest covered land to new settlers. During the present research 25 Binjhal families who traced their descent to the various segments and male branches of the Binjhal gountia jama, owned less than 1 acre of land per family and

their members had worked as agricultural labourers for a long time. About 50 Binjhal families were considered to be the descendants of migrants to Mahulkonda who had arrived like settlers of other caste groups at different times and circumstances. Reasons for which they had obtained land and the type and extent of land shares obtained by them were intricately connected to their status in the local society.

Binjhal migrant jama groups were known by the names of their origin village such as Sukha or by the names of their gotra (exogamous clan names such as dudka, samni, bag, amri, konda or through past official positions like jhankar (Binjhal priest). Their arrival stories indicate the kinds of circumstances under which they had obtained land in the village. Some like the Sukha ancestor had arrived on his own initiative, others like the Mahulkonda jhankar family had been appointed by the Borasambar zamindar. The jhankar or Binjhal priests' work was to ensure the wellbeing and fertility of people and crops by appeasing the earth-spirits. As per the legalised custom of the zamindari, the jhankar had been given a share of land on the fertile portion as a service grant. Descendants of this jama were among the more respected and better off Binjhals in the village. The Binjhal jama called samni was appointed by the zamindar as the jhankar of the neighbouring village. However the appointed place Bamanmal was a village dominated by the Haldiya- Teli caste and not considered to be a suitable place to live by the Binjhals and they were harassed and prevented them from claiming or cultivating their land for several years. Other Binjhal jama ancestors were distressed individuals who had come from nearby villages in search of agricultural wage-work, had married women from already present jamas and purchased tiny fields of marginal productivity and insecure title in the forest-covered in the outlying parts of Mahulkonda and contiguous upland village of Kamlapadar. Quality, extent and secured ownership of land obtained by Binjhal jama groups, whether they had purchased more land and how much their initial share had been partitioned in each generation were important factors in determining the economic conditions of the descendant families. The high levels of dependence on wage labouring work among Binjhals indicated their poor land control as well as the ownership of poor quality land.

In terms of reported measures, present Binjhal families owned and cultivated 90 acres of village land with fields of uneven quality and yields. A comparison based on

Mahulkonda's record of rights (village record of rights 1906-1926, 1926-1946, 1978) indicated that on the whole the land shares held by the Binjhals as a group had declined compared to other caste groups. Although this data only provides a partial and static picture of titled land and does not reveal various kinds of transactions around land or the extent of land that was actually cultivated by the Binjhals at any point in time, it does indicate deterioration in the landed status of the Binjhals. Moreover apart from the old headman family's share and the jhankar jama land, the land cultivated by the Binjhals was less in extent and quality compared to what had been obtained by the important land owning caste groups (Brahman, Kultha, Haldiya-Teli and Kallar). Prajati land was jealously hoarded by agnatic kin groups of landowning castes and land holdings enabled praja groups to consolidate their kin strength. Binjhal stories in which they describe their ancestors being outnumbered by people of other caste groups in particular villages indicate that numerical strength was a factor in protecting claims over land in the past. Over time Binjhal jama land have been subject to fragmentation that has affected other landholdings in the village, decreasing over generations through inheritance and partitioning. Extreme need had also involved sale and frequent mortgaging of rice growing fields generating infighting within agnates. Binjhal families often mortgaged a few fields for a number of years in return for money loans under agreements called chirrul or kontoria. In the past, some of these fields would be lost if the loan money was not repaid within stipulated time. Most attribute landlessness to the great poverty of their ancestors who had literally 'eaten' their land instead of its yields. Mahulkonda as its neighbouring villages had a large extent of waste and pasture-forests in the past. Such lands were often temporarily allocated by the gountia and later the village council, and some Binjhals families were struggling to obtain permanent rights to these fields. An elderly Binjhal man told me how the land that had been purchased and made into fields by his grandfather had submerged when a small irrigation project was built on the Mahulkonda stream in the 1980s. The village council had given his family some land in exchange from what used to be the gochar or pasture of Mahulkonda but there were no legal titles to this land. Many Binjhals did not recall there being any land in their families within living memory and it was only in recent times that they have been able to purchase or clear some fields.

Binjhal lives had been characterised by their economic dependence on other land owning caste groups and not surprisingly this had come to define their social status in the local society. Absence of land control by jama groups had meant that Binjhals had to serve as agricultural labourers not for their own lineage heads or gountia families of their own caste but other caste people. Along with other numerically strong subordinate caste groups (Gouds), Binjhals had worked as haliya or tied farm servants for important landowning Kultha and Brahman families in Mahulkonda and neighbouring villages for decades. Such families called sahuikars had provided cash and grain advances and loans to pay bride- price for Binjhal men. Desperately poor families had subsisted the decades before the 1980s entirely on forest work and clearing forest trees off the lands of wealthier praja. Except for the Mahulkonda jhankar jama and a branch of sukha jama, who had at one point employed farm servants (indicator of local wealth), all other families had suffered terrible privations in the pre-migration and pre-development decades of 1960-1980. Scope for rural employment had dried in Borasambar due to a series of drought years and many Binjhal families who depended on farm work had to leave their village. Some Binjhal men from the later arriving jamas had worked as farm servants for the 'new' headman family and old sahuikar families. Such work arrangements were greatly despised by contemporary villagers. When Shibo, a Binjhal man with a young family had to take up haliya work at the Brahman sahuikars household after he had given it up several years ago, to meet medical expenses for his children both of whom got malaria in 2003, he had viewed it as a reversal in his family fortune. Binjhals described their employers, if these were wealthier praja families as sahuikars. They acknowledged the economic wealth of the sahuikars but not their social superiority based on caste. Through their work roles they came close to the status of the other main numerically important subordinate caste, of herdsmen (Goud). Largest proportion of farm labourers in Borasambar villages belonged to these two caste groups. Despite many close friendships between the two groups and the fact that they often left in common work parties for seasonal migration, the Gouds considered themselves to be ritually superior to the Binjhals while Binjhals described the Gouds as people who had been dependent on them in the past.

Ritual subordination of the Binjhals expressed through the imposition of pollution rules was attributed to their specific characteristics and qualities from being adivasi

people. Some jati groups considered them to be polluting due to their consuming chicken or monitor lizards or snakes and drinking alcohol; practises common to many other groups. Binjhals too express their derision for people who consumed beef or fruit bats. Jati groups that took food and water or inter-dined with the Binjhals were considered also to have low social status. Binjhals did not enter the kitchens of other caste groups. They were also held to be ignorant or barbaric due to past proximity with the forest. Though an ascription that none of the inhabitants of Borasambar villages could escape, what was different about the Binjhals was that they had affinity to the life of the forest associated with practises such as hunting, drunken-ness and dancing. This special relationship was further reinforced by stories about Binjhals disinterest towards cultivation. They were known in the past to abandon their rice fields to participate in a wild pig hunt or chased (kheda) in the forest. Thus Binjhal poverty had resulted from their moral shortcomings. While the low status of the Binjhals is a settled issue for others, it is a greatly debated one for the Binjhals themselves. An older Binjhal woman from the juna gountia jama, who had a reputation for being an expert forest worker, when asked whether she had learnt such work in her childhood, had replied in a horrified tone that in her mother's house they never went to the forest. This was work that she had to learn later because her saas-ghar (mother-in-law's house) was impoverished. Another Binjhal woman when asked about the local dancing tradition 'dalkhai' had replied scornfully that such practises were prevalent only in forest villages like Mahulkonda and not in the western Borasambar village where she came from.

When the Binjhals described themselves as adivasi they associated themselves not with un-prestigious forest dwelling practises but used both Brahmanical cultural values as well as modern political identity to articulate their sense of loss and formulate their claims. Binjhals obtained official recognition of being adivasi as scheduled tribe only in 1976. Younger educated Binjhal men attributed this delay to the propensity of their elders to claim that they were of royal origins despite their miserable poverty. 'When the officers (school inspectors) saw us signing our names as 'Singh-Bariha' they would immediately declare that we were not adivasi and cancelled our scholarships'; one young man said. Recent gains among the Binjhals are attributed to government stipends to adivasi students and job reservations for scheduled tribes. However it is fairly common to observe Binjhal college graduates

working as farm labour. Binjhal successes in the competitive field of education and white collared employment have been limited because the field itself has become subject to high levels of competition. Moreover Binjhals said that they lacked knowledge about the right people or officials to bribe. In recent times, two people have obtained non-farm salaried employment and their families are considered better off than others. Levels of education have increased, though most families remain impoverished marginal farmers. A few achievements hide other tragedies. One of the first Binjhal men from Mahulkonda to obtain employment in the Forest department after a brief stint with a local NGO had died tragically from malaria, away from home in the early 1980s, another, who had worked as a railway police had killed himself. Older Binjhals describe these incidents to mark the misfortune that awaits Binjhals once they left the protection of the soil and protective boundaries of Borasambar.

In dusty schoolrooms of other villages and dustier fields where Binjhal caste sabha meeting were held and attended by important political representatives from the community, there were different and more influential debates about the social status of the Binjhals that used a familiar language of moral reform as they tried to project a homogeneous image of the past and the future of the Binjhals as an 'adivasi' community.¹⁸ Among the forest dwellers of India movements of reform and moral improvement has been documented by anthropologists (Fuchs 1965, Hardiman 1987, Baviskar 2008[1995], Sundar 1999, Dube 1998). Described as processes emerging from 'orthodox Hindu influences on the forest dwellers' way of life', these reform movements can be viewed both as evidence of subaltern agency as well as entrenched subordination due to its validation of mainstream hinduism. The Binjhal caste sabha projected the Binjhals through generic images of subjugation that described them as honest, simple-minded and easily duped and exhibiting an immoral fondness for drinking and hunting. In such formulations the present economic situation and social status of the Binjhals was attributed to their moral inadequacies and intrinsic nature. An important caste sabha leader, who was also a school principal, told me that their community was extremely gullible and unable to

¹⁸ In contrast to these, the stories related by the Binjhal villagers of western Borasambar in the 1970s were predominantly origin myths about Binjhal clan segments and justifications about the internal differences between them (Panda 2005).

recognize their own interest but at the same time proud and honest and never involved in thieving or fighting. Through its emphasis on honest-poverty and the rejection of forest dwelling practises, the narrative offered by the Binjhal schoolteacher redefined the social identity of the Binjhals as a subordinated community in distress partly through its own attributes. The leadership of the Binjhal jati samaj came from the literate and politically active section of the community, including members of the zamindar family who had reworked their history of kingship by disconnecting it from un-brahmanical, barbarous forest practises and threading it instead with historical narratives of national significance, for example, the role of the Binjhal zamindar of Ghes during 1857, the 'first war of independence'.¹⁹ The zamindar of Ghes, Madho Singh had been hanged for killing a British military officer in the period around 1857. One of his descendants is credited with reviving and organizing the Binjhal caste samaj in 1955. The caste organization aims to work for the 'social development and unity' of the community and had been the base for political mobilisation of Binjhals to contest state legislative assembly and panchayat elections. Described as a patriot and martyr, Madho Singh's martyrdom was commemorated not just in the region but also in the state capital and this was the new symbol for Binjhal unification and integration with the national mainstream under the guidance of their caste elite.

Like other impoverished and subordinated groups, the Binjhals described their situation principally with reference to their economic poverty or dependent positions with respect to dominant caste farmers. For the Binjhals, wealthy families who employed them were simply sahkars whose powers (unlike their own) did not result from divine pre-ordination but from illegitimate sources such as trading-wealth and money lending (sahkari) that involved practises of accumulation as against redistribution. Binjhal men described themselves as the kinsmen of kings who did not understand the corrupt techniques and intrigues that made the farmer-traders rich. By local tradition, prior to the 'revenue era' Binjhal clansmen under their 'raja' had ruled Borasambar and were the original and numerically dominant people of this region. The ex-zamindar family was Binjhal. In western Borasambar, more forested

¹⁹ In his essay, the pasts of an Indian village, Bernard Cohn had written that: 'Evoking the 'first war of independence' (the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857) means nothing outside of the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and few parts of western India except to the urban educated classes.' (2001[1987]: 98)

and less fertile than the east and the homeland of the ex-zamindar's clans, Binjhals were numerically dominant and had relatively better landed and social status (cf. Panda 2005). Brahman and Kultha cultivators have held regional political and economic power since the later half of nineteenth century when forest kingdoms were pacified and reconstituted as princely states and zamindari under British rule. For the Binjhals, being adivasi, was expressed through contradictory understandings: the sense of being a low-status, impoverished, labouring group as well as an affirmative political identity constructed from revived cultural resources including the memories and interpretations of prior claims over the soil of Borasambar.

2.4 Conclusion: Binjhal Narratives of Decline and Renewal

In an early summer day smothered in the fragrance of the withering Mango and Char flowers, in the forest village of Phiringimal, an impoverished Binjhal cultivator had spoken for a long time about their community both in terms of their original status as well as in terms of hierarchical rank in the caste system. In some ways this narrative was different from the ones I heard in Mahulkonda. Barely 20 km away from Mahulkonda, this was a relatively interior village where land was steep and rocky, cultivation was low yielding and livelihoods depended greatly on migration and forest rather than local cultivator-sahukars. As the smoke rose from the kahali that Jatru Bag smoked, he had described how the Binjhals had been created in the distant Vindhyagiri Mountain. Then twelve brothers who were expert archers had wandered into forested Borasambar and settled there after marrying the daughter of a Luhra (blacksmith), who gave birth to the Binjhals.²⁰ He describes how the Binjhals had settled Borasambar and how the Binjhal headmen had chosen the eldest among them to become their raja. But the brothers had lost their kingdom through the theft of their sacred thread by the Brahmans and their carriage by the Kulthas.

²⁰ kahali (home made cigarette about 8-10 inches long made from Rengal-Sal leaf) was used by very few people in Mahulkonda. In Phiringimal people still grew tobacco in their home gardens and had access to Rengal trees.

This narrative resembles the myth about the Borasambar zamindari published in the colonial era gazetteers with some variations.²¹ The point that Jatru wanted to make was that the Binjhals were, to begin with socially and ritually superior to the two important dominant caste groups in the Borasambar zamindari who acted as priests as well as held the position of headman (gountia) in most villages. Using the terminology of hierarchical ranking, he had described Brahman priests to be similar to Chandal (untouchable castes) since they participated in funerals. Using the other prevalent framework of farm-forest opposition, he had described the Kulthas as upstart forest dwellers who till recently had lived off meagre forest produce. Binjhal subordination was established when suddenly people refused to take food and water from them. Indeed in the past it was the Binjhals who would never consume the food of the Brahmans.

Jatru Bag's story followed the template that subordinate caste groups use to describe the diminution in their social status in relation to other caste groups where a precious possession is lost through a chance mistake or trickery. Attributing to other jati groups pollution causing behaviour, meant he had used the present idea of jati as a hierarchically arranged social order but had rearranged the terms of the argument by displacing the groups with the greatest claims of ritual purity. Apart from these symbolic similarities and continuities with tales of subordination of marginal groups from elsewhere in India, such narratives provide a way towards understanding how ordinary non-literate Binjhals justified their relational status in Borasambar zamindari. The stealth of priesthood and kingship was not simply a compensatory tale to justify the present status but also a culturally intelligible way of remembering and communicating specific claims associated with the control of traditional official positions by the Binjhals in the Borasambar zamindari.²² The point of this chapter has been to illustrate the historically layered sense of community and identities in the western Orissa village by foregrounding the trajectory of symbolic gains and losses of the Binjhals including how they interpreted this process. While the rural social

²¹ In the gazetteer myth Binjhal claims to the Borasambar zamindari is obtained firstly as a gift from a deity- the goddess Bindhyabasini, secondly through the ability of their ancestors the 12 brothers to impress the king of Puri through their archery skills and thirdly because they sheltered and protected a pregnant queen of Patna (present Bolangir district) and helped her son to regain his kingdom.

²² The exclusivity of the Binjhals may not just be a present fiction. An early Famine Commission's Enquiry Report mentions that the starving Binjhals refused to eat food that was prepared by Brahman cook in the relief kitchens and eventually Binjhal cooks had to be engaged to persuade the starving people to attend the relief kitchens. Fear of witchcraft and contamination pervades the food practises of many communities in western Orissa. (see Craddock 1898)

order with its hierarchies, reciprocities and pattern of resource use and distribution reflected the orthodoxy of a Brahmanical cultural model that involved subordinating the forested past, the instability of the same was indicated in the contested claims that revived, re-interpreted and ensured the survival of the practises and aspects of the past to meet present aspiration. This chapter aims to contribute to studies about the social and historical constitution of categories and group identities amidst symbolic struggle and how construction of meaningful self-identities by subordinate social groups indicated their social location, constrained and constituted by the limited resources available in those positions.

For Binjhals, ancestors never disappeared with death but were reborn among or revisit their descendants. At the time of the birth of a child, a specialist diviner is called to decipher the child's ancestry and the ancestor's rebirth by 'reading paddy grains'. After death the spirit of the ancestor is trapped in a winged insect, usually a moth and brought home. With the birth of every child a particular ancestor is recalled and his character, personality, physical appearance, deeds and times are remembered. As the child grows into an adult the ancestor is recalled and recognised through the everyday acts and characteristics of the person. All Binjhals are shaped and inhabited by the 'mashan' of a recent or distant genealogical ancestor. When the ancestor is illustrious his or her deeds are remembered in the context of the descendant's everyday life. In this way, through stories that bring the past into the present, the sense of continuity is maintained. For most Binjhals, the recent past was distressingly impoverished and the present only better in a relative sense. But the remembered past of ordinary villager differed greatly from the official discourses and ambitions of caste sabha elites and illuminates aspects of broader historical processes in ways that dispute the self-evidence of Binjhal marginality. These narratives where Binjhal ancestors were never foolish or shortsighted farmers, instead appear powerful and perform illustrious deeds, constitutes the pivot around which the historical processes around the establishment of British rule and politics of regime change in nineteenth century Borasambar are deciphered and examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Glorious Pasts of Forest Dwellers: Historical Incidents and Narratives of Kingship

Elderly Binjhal men of Mahulkonda sometimes told stories about their distant past. This chapter begins with the discussion of one such story in which a Binjhal family receives the inam (gift) of twelve villages from the raja of Borasambar for performing a valorous deed. Stories such as this established the glorious pasts of the Binjhals, setting them apart from other villagers. It reflected possibly the aspirations of higher status of an impoverished family that sought social recognition of their pre-eminence or expression of recent social mobility. It was perhaps a diversionary tactic to avoid talking about the necessities of the present or to bolster the numerous difficult to substantiate claims of the present such as land rights. In recent years the Binjhal political and caste leadership have revived and redefined the past to create solidarity and assertiveness in the community that serves the need for democratic vote-bank politics. Literacy has enabled them to reconnect with their past and gather them as 'cultural resources'. Some of these arguments that situate the narratives of kingship squarely in the field of status claims in the present, have been discussed in chapter 2, the specific connection with land rights will be explore in chapter 4. The objective in this chapter is an attempt to demonstrate how such stories that were about moral claims and material losses also connect in many ways with the historical processes around the transformation in practises of rule in forested kingdoms of western Orissa that have relevance for the present social conditions of the Binjhals.

Stories collected and recorded by anthropologists from the tribal or adivasi people of the Central Indian forest belt are replete with references of kingship. Some describe the role of such groups in the coronation of kings; others recall their critical contribution in the sustenance of local kingdoms (Roy 1912, Sinha 1962, Guha 1999, Schnepel 1995, 2002, Mahapatra 1987, Gell1997, Bailey 1957, 1960, Padel 2000, Bayly 1999, Furer-Haimendorf 1979, Sundar 1999, Kulke 2001). Narratives of kingship among forest dwellers have been interpreted as claims of royal status by a 'tribal-aristocracy' under 'Hindu' influence (Deliege 1997, Baviskar 2008[1995], Kulke

2001) and of little relevance to their contemporary conditions.²³ But tribal claims have also been interpreted as evidence indicating that they had held positions of king-like authority, power and status within state systems even though they may have espoused radically different style of kingship as compared to the Brahmanical Hindu model (Standing 1976, Sinha 1987, Hardiman 1994, Skaria 1999). In this chapter, I draw insight from the above scholarship to analyze a Binjhal villagers' story about the past and events from nineteenth century recorded in British military correspondence that simultaneously chart the emergence of new centres of kingly power and the diminishing viability of forest based political practises in the Borasambar zamindari. Binjhal village stories that speak of their services to and kinship with the zamindar of Borasambar are not simply status claims pertaining to the present but also reveal aspects of the past from their situated perspectives. Such stories juxtaposed with textually recorded historical incidents that describe the establishment of British administration and the symbolic battles over legitimate rule provide complex and contradictory explorations into the processes and discourses that have produced the marginality of contemporary tribal groups.

Tribal rebellions and suppressions triggered by processes that affected the pre-colonial political and economic autonomy of groups living in 'tracts on the borders and peripheries between kingdoms' have been well documented by historians (Padel 2000:23). Archived texts and oral narratives about the Borasambar zamindari provide partial and partisan glimpses of this process, providing information that is difficult to accommodate within models of seamless continuity or permanent change. This chapter focuses on the ways in which kingship was consolidated in the network of state system in the Mahanadi valley and surrounding hill areas after a prolonged series of small battles between zamindari inhabitants and the administration of the British East India company. While critically affecting the interests of dominant clans of forest dwelling groups, this process was not a unidirectional conquest or loss and gains better clarity if viewed within the fields of pre-colonial stratification, emergent local interests and regional political practise. The subordination of forest dwelling

²³ To seek antiquity and claim descent from kings, deities and cultural heroes to demonstrate past and present status was a standard practise in India (Singer 1971). However among groups described as 'tribals' living in relative isolation from mainstream society, such proclamations were viewed as inauthentic, anomalous or irrelevant. For example, Deliege (1997:123) views the Bhil adoption of titles such as 'Tadvi', 'Patelia', 'Grasia', etc- as ambitions and claims based on a 'sanskritizing ideal'.

groups like the Binjhals was activated by the end of their pre-colonial roles within the state systems of forested Orissa but this process unfolded within the apparent continuity and consolidation of kingship during British rule.

So what were the pre-colonial roles of the Binjhals and how did these get redefined in influential ways in the nineteenth century? In British travel and military accounts Binjhals were warlike hill dwellers living in the peripheral areas of local kingdom controlling large tracts of forests. Their agency in local intrigues and the solidarity of the clansmen disquieted early administrators who saw them as detrimental to the extension of peace and productivity in the region. Known through their roles of raiding and plundering, they clearly demonstrated the 'military and social vitality of the periphery' (Dirks 1987). Early administrative decision to establish road routes through zamindaris ran counter to Binjhal interests linked to the control of the routes and resources of the forest. Being labelled and linked to other neighbouring hill dwellers in the vicinity (Konds, Gonds and Kolas) reinforced their identity as savages and justified their pacification (Bates 1995, Padel 2000). Binjhal actions that appeared as unique acts of savagery against settled places were the standard ways in which recognition of claims and privileges were secured in medieval India. This agency was not anomalous but intrinsic to the exigencies of regional politics. Early encounters between the Borasambar Binjhals and the East India Company's administrators reveal how local alliance building and influencing succession of kings failed to marginalize the power of clansmen in forest areas and only became effective when simultaneous concessions and punishments were meted out to the numerous zamindaris and local kingdoms of western Orissa. With the demise of their militant roles with respect to local kingdoms with permanent borders and incomes, forest areas and forest dwellers lost their strategic utility for local kingdoms but many among them emerged as powerful little kings in their limited and pre-designated domains.

The pacification wars were followed by the symbolic re-adjustment in the narratives of kingship among the colonial administrators and by the claimants to these positions of privilege. By exploring the dominant and marginal narratives of rule it is possible to understand how local political practices were redefined and managed to accommodate the interests of the early colonial administration. Drawing insight from

the notion of 'stranger-king' (Sahlins 1981, Southall 2004[1956], Wills 1919), I show how 'tribal' narratives of 'shared-kingship' have a distinctly different emphasis from the Brahmanical model that gained influence in the semi-autonomous kingdoms sanctioned by the colonial state. Here kingship is believed to have originated in a conditional gift that was made by the dominant clan to the stranger-king. Based on practises of 'wildness' (Skaria 1999) and the strategic objective of consolidating and improving the territorial rights and resources of dominant clans of forest dwelling groups these narratives weld the ideology of clan-ship to the conditional association with local state-systems. Survival and advancement as little kings however was dependent not as before on managing and building shifting alliances based on the ideology of clan-ship²⁴ but obtaining metaphoric if not physical distancing from forests, a place that was being objectified in specific ways in the nineteenth century. The category of primitive people or aboriginals used to describe the Binjhals from the late nineteenth century also placed them at an evolutionary distance and hierarchical disadvantage from other social groups in the locality who did not have very dissimilar beliefs and practises.

In what way did the transformation in practises of rule in the western Orissa region affect the Binjhals of Borasambar? The Binjhals were affected through their diminished ability to play and replicate the role of little kings in a lesser domain and their resulting distance over time from the centres of power in their region. Making their subjection to the zamindar, to appointed village headman and later to wealthier praja (subjects) unambiguous and self-evident fact.

3.1 The Gift of Twelve Villages: A Family Story from Mahulkonda

In the hot rainless days in mid September 2002, I traced dusty patterns on the inner-courtyard of the much-partitioned houses that belonged to the descendants of the old headman family of Mahulkonda village as I waited to listen to their memories, expecting the usual conspiracy filled accounts of loss of ancestral lands and

²⁴ This analysis is particularly applicable to the eastern and more prosperous and fertile areas of the Borasambar zamindari. In the western more forested and comparatively hillier part of the zamindari, where the Borasambar zamindar's direct lineage is said to have originated, Binjhal clan-ship had persisted to some extent through the colonial period (see Panda 2005), though the association of wellbeing and prosperity with the more fertile regions is widespread.

unending dead-end legal disputes with other village families, but heard instead an unexpected story, from the times of 'rajri' (kingdoms). S, who spoke while he fashioned out of bamboo the elaborate conical fishing trap called the dhopa, was among the older non-literate men in the bariha jama, the best raconteur, making up fluently when he lost the thread and never waiting for my questions. I had wondered where he would go fishing that year as all the jore and nallias (hill-streams) were dry. In their home garden (bari) was displayed a few dried up, stick-thin brinjal and chilly plants. Behind the garden, lay the vast expanse of the dust-green mal fields, which should have been vivid with rice seedlings at that time of the year. S was not inclined to discuss the unfolding drought present or past instead while his fingers worked at cutting fine strips of bamboo, he related the oldest story he remembered, about the pre-eminence of their family and how the village of Mahulkonda had come to them as a royal gift.

'In the past, all Binjhal families like ours had weapons in their house – guns (bonduk), swords (khonda), spears (barchhi), shield (dhal). We had this one 'dhal' made of elephant hide that could deflect bullets. We kept weapons to protect our 'country'/territory (desh): this. Borasambar was our country, then the sarkar, the English sarkar, I think, banned our weapons. We couldn't fight anymore, the fight went out of us – that's why my grandfathers one day, took all their weapons and buried them inside the large family well. You can see that well, it's right there still in our Bari. A few weapons, we kept those we worship on the nuakhai day...we fought wars, the very early ones, the old fights...

They say, that one day when a group of my ancestors were going as was customary to tie the 'paga' (turban) on the Patna raja, they stopped at a forest to rest and eat. While the main group rested by the river, one of the budas (old men/ancestors) went ahead in disguise to the Patna raja's court. There he heard the raja's 'mahanty' dewan remark that it was a shame that a group of uncivilized Binjhals should tie the king's turban. The buda went back to the forest and reported the insult to their raja. Humiliated and hurt the bariha raja declared that he would never go to the Patna raja's court again. He came home brooding and locked himself up in a room. He wouldn't eat, sleep or do anything. Worried that their raja would starve to death the

budas (ancestors) decided to kill the minister. They went to his house armed to the teeth. In those days there were no 'chun-cerment' (concrete) houses. Even the minister lived in a mud house. They dragged him out and beat him till he was half-dead – but still he wouldn't die – he had this powerful protective medicine tied around his waist. Finally they asked the minister to let go, why do you want to suffer like that? They said to him. At that the dewan untied the medicine that was protecting him and threw it to the ground. The budas killed him, chopped off his head and carried it to their raja. The bariha raja then put tika on his forehead with the dewan's blood and sat down to eat rice. As inam (reward) the Binjhal budas were given 12 villages by their raja and from that day they became the 'baropallia babu' collecting the 'malikana', 'malguzari' for all the villages. Mahulkonda was one of these 12 villages. (September 2002)

I heard the above story from S, the eldest son of a less important line of the old headman lineage (bariha jama) of Mahulkonda. His wizened face and frail form made him look older than his age. When asked, he would like other older villagers reply with an amused expression: 'what is this age that you keep asking us about?' Like other elderly Binjhals, the fact that he was not literate distressed him. His father had chosen him to look after chash (cultivation). He was married to the daughter of a gountia (headman) of village in Patna (Bolangir district), but it was a family just as impoverished. Even by village standards they were poor with 4 acres of land, only some of which was duli, fit for growing rice. Most years they could barely afford to keep a yoke of plough bulls through the year. Made by his father, mistry-buda, the exterior of their un-plastered burnt brick house was imposing by old village standard, but the interior was unfinished, earthen, and narrow and divided into crowded quarters through numerous partitions around a central courtyard. S attributed the reduced productivity of his family farm to his declining strength, after a deadly attack of tonhai (witchcraft) a few years ago²⁵.

²⁵ Witchcraft accusations (tonhai) are very common in the village. Tonhai are both men and women and are always people who are known to the victims, usually kin or neighbours. I could not discover any caste or gender dimension or any direct economic interest underlying tonhai accusations. But the accused were often in a vulnerable economic and social status through caste or gender. The person S and his entire jama spoke as being a tonhai had no apparent connection with the family. But the effect of several such accusations has sealed the hapless individual's reputation in the village. I was warned not to fraternize too much with the person or accept food or drink, since such individuals 'could not help' practicing their skill on people.

These details convey an image of the present circumstances of the Binjhals caught in the penurious circumstances of insecure subsistence farming and low paid wage work. It illustrates the similarities between their lives and the lives of other impoverished village people, their agrarian miseries and rare chances of mobility. What distinguishes them from other is however their remembered stories that offers a contrast between their current and remembered status. Binjhals especially of important village jamas (lineages) preserved their past in many ways. Some of these seemed encrusted in the odd pieces of dusty old weaponry that I found in many houses: swords, daggers, tridents, arrow heads, chains, horn shaped powder magazines of archaic rusted guns and hunting horns. S told me how in their family old weapons were kept in the house of the descendant of the eldest branch of the lineage and given offerings during the harvest festival and at the time of Dashera. The room where the weapons 'lived' was an active place; animated by the regular visitations of noisy and hungry ancestral spirits (debta). For Binjhal families such practises serve as a reminder to themselves and to others of their past of kingship. Others villagers recall the distant pasts differently and impersonally, as barbaric and violent times when the forests were dense and settled farms were scarcely to be found in Borasambar.

In S's story the killing of the dewan of Patna is not a deed of meaningless violence. Instead it is linked to the symbolism of royal gift and rendition of services, about redistribution of the resources of the kingly domains, transactions believed to be one of the central principles in the organization of the Indian society. The story described Binjhals' activities in terms of protection and guarding of territory. Abandonment of weapons marks a decline in the power of the ancestors and linked with change of regime, reference to the 'English sarkar' and a sense or fear of persecution. In the story the Binjhals are called uncivilized, not fit to perform ceremonial duties for great kings but they have the power to avenge such aspersions on their status (which they lacked at present). The insult is attributed to the minister of Patna whose influence over the king is attributed to his shamanic power, as powerful persons are believed to have. By doing so the story avoids casting aspersions on the raja of Patna himself. Kings often have wicked ministers just as the 'sarkar' is given a bad name by corrupt officials. Since the Binjhal ancestors were well versed in magical crafts,

they could identify and resolve the crisis. The outcome of their loyalty to their raja was the grant of twelve villages with chiefly and revenue-collecting rights (malikana and malguzari) over these that gave the ancestors of S a share in kingship. Through this grant they also obtained the title of bariha or the chief of twelve villages.

References to Patna are common in village discussions. Many Mahulkonda families have ties of marriage and kinship with Patna villages. The nearest village was a mere twenty km away, though one would encounter the high, still relatively forested hills of the Gandhamardan on the way. Village people often went there when in need of good quality timber for house building or money loans from marwari money-lenders at relatively better rates of interests than what village sahuks provided. Beyond the state reserved forest where women collected mahul flowers in early spring, I was often pointed out the 'mahasimana' or great border that separated raj-Patna from 'our-Borasambar'. The Binjhal story about the relationship between their ancestors, the Borasambar zamindar and the king of Patna (present district of Bolangir and a former princely state) is no longer relevant for most village people. To understand aspects of the story (apart from the pragmatic), it is necessary to look at other available accounts of the past. For this I turn now to scattered archival evidence that describe how in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Borasambar and Patna were segments of an interconnected network of kingdoms situated in the hills, forests and valleys of the Mahanadi River between the territories controlled by the raja of Berar (Maratha Bhonsle rulers) (Wink 1986: 107). The segments of these local kingdoms had frequent disputes and on many occasions sought external, imperial arbitration of local problems without surrendering their political autonomy.

3.2 'Daring bandits and Savage Hill men': Colonial rule and Forest dwellers

In 1790 a British contingent travelling on horse back from Calcutta to Nagpur, cutting across central Orissa, had chosen an 'unfrequented route' that went through 'the territory of the Borasambar Raja', an area described as covered in deep forests and ghauts (hills). By missing the main route and in search of water, the group had stumbled on a village only to meet the unfriendly inhabitants; 'mountaineers' who

had greeted them with 'hostile war cries, brandishing their axes and threatening to pull their bowstrings.' The travellers had used firelocks to deter them. In retaliation the villagers had set on fire a stretch of dry bamboo forest, 3 miles long, to cut off their exit. The only word that the travellers had understood was 'bargah' by which they had gathered that the village people had mistaken them for Maratha soldiers. The travellers' account ends with a note of warning to future travellers who wished to cross Borasambar, a place they described as inhabited by 'daring robbers and savage hill-men' (Early European Travellers in the Nagpore Territories, 1930).

In the late eighteenth century, the zamindari of Borasambar was situated in the large swathes of hill and forest country that existed between the Maratha governed subas of Katak and Nagpur. This area was broadly known as the 'Gondwana' (country of the Gonds) (Wink 1986, Kulke and Rothermund 2004). An early gazetteer described this region as, 'wild and woody countries, affording little or no revenue or supplies, being in reality of no political importance further than as presenting a strong frontier to Bengal and Orissa, for being rugged and mountainous, and overrun with thick jungle, no army of any considerable number or equipment could penetrate through them' (Hamilton 1820:5). Accounts of British travellers describe the hill-forest areas and their inhabitants as a dangerous group of people: 'mountaineers, savages, daring robbers' who were always armed and ready for confrontation. Some attributed the siege attitude of villagers to the 'ravages of the Maratha soldiers and their booty hunting camp followers'. It was believed that the deserted villages and the armed, angry and defensive villagers hiding in the forests of the zamindari areas were escaping the Maratha revenue demands (EET, 1930). Villagers beset not just with revenue collectors but also by wild animals and bands of predatory raiders called the Pindaris, had expressed longing for Mughal peace (Motte 1799). In these areas travelers were frequently led astray till they lost their way among the perilous Ghats (hill passes) and dense forests. What emerges from these accounts other than the standard representation of a predecessor regime as 'oppressive and extractive' (Dube 1998) that served to legitimate British presence in what were still Maratha territories, is a growing tendency to associate intrinsic dissidence with forest areas; an impression that the British inherited from the Mughal and Maratha regimes but that was also confirmed by later encounters, the many 'rural battles' that they fought with forest dwellers and their rulers (Stein 1999, Bates 1995).

The point of view of British administrators came to influence the future of the forest kingdoms and their inhabitants in important ways after the Company obtained the Diwani of Bengal and Orissa and entered into treaty relationship with the Marathas of Berar. The concerned forest polities²⁶ formed the southern, western and eastern borders of Bengal, Katak (Orissa) and Nagpur, respectively. Apart from their undesirable inhabitants, forest areas were viewed as scarcely populated and unproductive spaces though replete with untapped wealth.²⁷ Later administrators showed a more astute understanding of political realities and social organization of forest polities around their military functions and orientation. But the early impression of the savagery of forest dwellers became a useful and powerful trope (Padel 2000, Skaria 1999) that later fused with colonial ethnography (Bates 1995, Bayly 1999, Padel 2000) to inform caste stereotypes and categorize social groups, lending official legitimacy to chosen groups in the evolving struggles over land, status and official positions. But the point here is not to attribute agency to these overwhelming discourses at the outset but try to understand some of the processes and struggles through which these became naturally applicable to the Binjhals in places like Borasambar.

3.3 Conflict over Road Routes: Dissidence and Forest Areas

Throughout the early nineteenth century the inhabitants of the zamindari had steadfastly resisted the construction of roads through Borasambar and this had brought the zamindar into direct confrontation with British interests.²⁸ In 1809, the

²⁶ Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India. Extract Political Letter from Fort William Dated 21st November 1833. Para 427. The dispatch recorded as per margin contains a list of all the chiefs and zamindars estates under the superintendence of the Agent of the South West Frontier with particulars exhibited in a tabular form.

²⁷ The first detailed travel account was drafted by a representative of Robert Clive of Bengal who had travelled to meet the raja of Sambalpur in 1766 in the quest of obtaining a stake in its famed diamond mines (Motte 1799).

²⁸ 'The pivot of British policy' writes Wink (1986:81) in the context of the late eighteenth century Marathas was 'to treat each important sardar as an independent sovereign' (Wink 1986:81). Similar policy had been adopted in the context of the Mahanadi valley kingdoms. In 1821, separate sanads with fixed tributes had been given to the rajas and zamindars (Mishra 1986:46). In 1834, the western Orissa region including the kingdoms and zamindaris were included within the jurisdiction of South West Frontier Province.

zamindar had earned disrepute by arriving at a meeting with the British representative Colonel. Broughton, with an army of five hundred men armed with lit matchlocks and had refused to discuss either treaty relations or proposed 'dawk' or postal routes through Borasambar.²⁹ British East India Company's government's dispersed territories (Bengal, Nagpur and Cuttack) were separated by large areas of hill-forest corridors that traversed through the numerous kingdoms of Mahanadi valley. Constructing roads and postal routes, one of the earliest interventions of the Company's military administrators was resisted by the forest kingdoms who both viewed such projects as a direct threat to their political and economic autonomy and also wished to understand how these interventions would affect their existing rights.

Road corridors constituted highly valued resources for forest zamindaris. Taxing traders and plundering soldiers and travelers were important occupations of semi-nomadic inhabitants of such places who viewed themselves as the guardians of hill passes. Moreover despite appearances, the hill-forest regions did not consist of areas of primeval wilderness inhabited by roving bandits but also contained a network of well-traversed paths frequented by pack-bullock traders, pilgrims and pastoralists. Borasambar for instance was known as much for its wild animals as for its vast pastures (Grant 1870). The pack bullock traders connected the river trade of the Mahanadi to the central Indian plains. Surrounded and intersected by forested hills there were also precious fresh water sources, fertile valleys and stockade villages with settled cultivation and groves of fruit trees. Zamindaris contained relatively greater forest areas and fewer sedentary villages than the plains and valley where the larger kingdoms were located. But everywhere the boundaries between forests and settled cultivation areas were fluid and fluctuating. Most kings and especially the zamindars were rightly worried that the construction of these paths would allow open access to their territories (Motte 1799, Kittoe 1839).

A number of important routes meandered through the Borasambar zamindari. Some had been acquired through successful battles against neighbouring zamindaris and

²⁹ IOR/F/4/757/20546. Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India/Bengal Political Department.No.22. Operations against the Zemindar of Boorah Sambah

kingdom in the background of Maratha-British negotiations and tussles over imperial control in Orissa and Chattisgarh. According to a British East India Company military correspondence, the routes controlled by the Borasambar zamindar were: ‘.... 30 Coss or 6 marches of the great road from Cuttack to great Nagpoor... the road projected by his Lordship in Council from Midnapur, the direct route by an admirable road without a single ghaut or pass from Sumbhulpoor to Raepoor lying through the heart of Bora Samber whilst any deviation to the right or left would involve it in mountains and passes.’³⁰ Through their control over these routes, zamindari inhabitants had taxed Maratha troops on their way in and out of his country while refusing to pay their tribute by retreating into the hills.³¹ The Marathas had complained to the British about arrears of unpaid tributes and being attacked and raided by the Borasambar zamindar while on their way from Cuttack to Nagpur with valuable merchandise. But by the early nineteenth century the Borasambar zamindar, Bhagwant Bariha had improved his ties with the Marathas and in turn obtained a ‘rahadaree parwana’ – a formal recognition of being the guardian of the pass.³² When the Marathas went to war with the British, the Borasambar zamindar had received Maratha agents and provided them hospitality and safe conduct.³³ Borasambar provided refuge areas for rebels, bandits and Pindaris from Central India who were fleeing British soldiers. One of the last recorded accounts that describe these activities is from 1844, when a British political agent had visited the zamindari on behalf of the Raja of Nagpur. 700 heads of cattle had been ‘plundered’ from Nagpur and the bandit Aram Singh Dao was being sheltered in Borasambar. British intervention had led to the surrender of the bandit and the cattle by the

³⁰ Extract Bengal Political Consultations/From E.Roughsedge, Political Agent, to Mr.Secretary Metcalfe, 22nd February 1819

³¹ Borasambar’s situation was not unique. An account written in 1799 describes the Raja of Daspalla taxing the Marathas on the Barmul pass that lay between dense forest full of tigers and hills. “This village and the adjacent country called Daspalla, for about 14 kos, belong to a Zamindar whose strong situation has rendered him almost independent of the Marathas; and the present raja of Nagpur, Raghoji, has given up the consideration of his peshkash or tribute, and conferred upon him the nishan and maratib, colours and arms, on condition that he will grant free egress and regress to his subjects over his side of the Barmul pass.” (EET 1930:59).

³² Sinha, 1950.Selections from the Nagpur Residency Records, Vol I, 1799-1806, letter, no.12, trans. of Antajee Naik’s deposition.

³³ *ibid*

zamindar.³⁴ In 1844, Borasambar paid a tribute of Rs.160 to the British, Ramdayal Bariha had died and his widow and young son were managing the zamindari.³⁵ Thus forest kingdoms sought confirmation of their rights to collect tax and issue levies from larger authority in return for providing a nominal tribute and military service. Often they would fight using their kin base followers and naturally fortified location till they could enforce such recognition or confirmation of their rights to rule in their zamindari and tax travelers who passed through their territory.

Resistance to road building can be connected to the local concerns about the continuity of these specialised activities of forest areas. The situation of Borasambar was not unique. An account written during this period by a military administrator reported similar local reactions to the proposition of road building through the kingdom of Keonjhar in north Orissa (Kittoe 1839). In his journal Lt.Kittoe mentions being offered gifts and presents by the Keonjhar Raja if he could ensure that the road planned by the East India Company's government did not pass near their fortress, Keonjhargarh, or through their kingdom. Kittoe had refused to comply with the offer made by Keonjhar Raja and had reminded them instead of the 'the orders of the government' (ibid: 617-618). However as a word of caution, Kittoe had mentioned the 'Kol rebellions' of the previous decade that had devastated cultivation and allowed forests to grow back on large areas of the zamindari. British response to such resistance was negotiation followed by military action. While many small battles were fought and won, these did not ensure permanency of agreed treaty relations. Later British policy sought more permanent solution by ending the dissidence that was located in forest areas through building of strong local alliances. In the next section I describe the dispute between Patna and Borasambar and the British involvement in this dispute that needs to be viewed in this background.

³⁴ IOR/V/27/272/26 Ouseley, J.R. 1847. Reports by the Agent to the Governor General of Tours made by him through the districts attached to the Political Agency of the Southwest Frontier. 1840, 1844, 1847. Calcutta: W.Ridsdale Military Orphan Press.

³⁵ ibid:22

3.4 A Dispute between Borasambar and Patna

Disputes between rajas and zamindars were common in the early nineteenth century forested Orissa, when smaller kings declared independence and denied the lordship of a greater king (Schnepel 2002, Peabody 1991). Frequently, the British East India Company's administrators participated and intervened in these local battles and intrigues to fulfill their early objectives. Borasambar was a zamindari and a pargana of Patna with a specific tribute and military contribution (Aitcheson 1909: 417). Patna paid tribute to the kingdom of Ratanpur (Bilaspur district) (Senapati 1968, Banerji 1931), when the Bhonsle rulers of Nagpur (also known as Raja of Berar) acquired Chattisgarh from the Mughals.³⁶ While the revenue and administrative structure of Patna and Borasambar in Maratha-British treaty papers suggested their incorporation and subordination within larger kingdoms, in most cases the zamindari tribute, military service and deference to their rajas were fluid arrangements, dependent on the state of broader regional politics. What was the nature of dispute between Borasambar and Patna and how did British East India Company administrators seek to restore the balance in this relationship? What does this intervention say about the power of clan based forest zamindaris of that period?

Spread throughout the landscape of 18th century India, zamindari regimes have been described by Wink (1986) as co-sharers of the realm of the kings. Wink (1986) has further analyzed how such political entities frequently shifted their alliances with supra-regional kings using the strategy of dissidence, best described by the Mughal term -'fitna'. A relationship that gravitated between service and conflict was intrinsic to the nature of political arrangement of power sharing between the local kingdoms and the kin based zamindaris. The king often had effective control or royal authority, over his main territory, the area described as 'domain land', 'crown land' or khalsa in western Orissa. Away from the economic and political centres were the zamindaris; clan-dominated areas 'ruled by the dominant chiefs of dominant castes' (Dirks 1987). The zamindars claimed the rights over their territory as 'primary rights to soil'

³⁶ The word 'zamindar' was used during the Mughal period to denote various holders of hereditary interests, ranging from powerful, independent and autonomous chieftains to petty intermediaries at the village level. See (Hasan 1969:18)

(Peabody 1991:40) as autochthonous settlers, predating the establishment of the principal kingdom.

According to contemporary British accounts, internal competition between the kingdoms and their zamindaris as well as between kingdoms over agriculturally productive areas, revenue rights, cultivators and supra-regional imperial recognition had escalated under the brief period of Maratha rule (1760-1826) when existent treaty-tribute relations were in a strained and fluid state. The British East India Company provided support to the weakened kings of the Mahanadi valley in the hope of gaining lasting alliance and loyalty and to redress the balance between the weakened kings and the empowered peripheries. The point was to improve the stability of the khalsa and bring the predatory margins represented by the zamindars and chiefs under greater control. Khalsa was the term used by the Marathas and Mughals to refer to land that was directly ruled by them and for denoting the area whose revenue would be deposited in the imperial treasury (Wink 1986, Hasan 1969). British objective in reducing the capabilities of dissidence was to control the dispersion and redistribution of the revenue of the Khalsa. Keeping these concerns in mind, let us read a letter written in 1833 by a British administrator, Captain Wilkinson who was serving as the Political Agent of the South West Frontier Province of Bengal and reporting the occurrence of a violent incident in the kingdom of Patna.

*'I have the honor to report for the information of the Government that I have received a letter from Bhopal Singh, Rajah of Patna dated 20th ultimo reporting that his dewan Bulbudded had been murdered by a party of Dacoits, his house was surrounded and set on fire to by them, and in the attack besides the Dewan, his wife, brother in law, two servants and a purdeecee lost their lives.... The Rajah who has some misunderstanding with the Borasamber zumeendar is under an impression that the Banditti were sent by him.'*³⁷

³⁷ IOR/F/4/1484/58532: Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India, July 1832-August 1833. Letter dated 22nd August 1833, Murder of the Rajah of Patna's Dewan and household by a party of Dacoits.

In his analysis of the incident, Captain Wilkinson refers to the information he had received from the Raja of Patna. According to this information the fatal attack on Patna's minister was perpetrated by dacoits and bandits sent by the Borasambar zamindar. In the rest of his letter Wilkinson expresses his suspicions about other zamindars as possible perpetrators of the crime in Patna, such as the 'Kondhs Chiefs'. It also reveals British willingness to make alliance with local kings in exchange for providing them protection from their recalcitrant subordinates and subjects. Wilkinson writes about the Raja of Patna as well disposed towards the British Government but weak and lacking control over his Kondhs subjects and continually soliciting the agent to assist him in bringing his subjects under subjection.

3.5 Rural Battles and Restoring Balance

The trouble between Patna and Borasambar had received much prominence in the previous decade when the British East India Company became active in the region of the Mahanadi valley kingdoms after acquiring it from the Bhonsle of Nagpur (1803-1826).³⁸ After the second Anglo Maratha war in 1817, the East India Company had released the Rajas of Mahanadi valley kingdoms from Maratha captivity and had become engaged in local intrigue to create authority lines for their own purposes (Jenkins 1827). The king of Patna had informed the British administrators about the capture and occupation of 120 villages of Patna by the zamindar of Borasambar. Responding to this request rapidly, in 1819 British East India Company's Ramgarh battalion based in Chotanagpur and commanded by Major. Roughsedge led a military expedition to Borasambar. The British battalion had found the zamindar in his 'mountain stronghold' by the British troops and weapons, cattle and grain stores in large quantities were taken. The zamindar Ramdayal Bariha defeated was compelled to sign a treaty with the East India Company through which he had to cede 120 villages to the Raja of Patna. He was however allowed to retain 84 villages that he had captured from the neighbouring zamindari of Phuljhar. A tribute payable to the British was fixed and 'parties of sipahis' were posted on either ends of the

³⁸ The Mahanadi districts were ceded to the East India Company by the Marathas at first in 1803, in 1806 the districts were returned to the Marathas and in 1826, that they were permanently ceded to the British. The treaty of perpetual Friendship and Alliance between the Honourable East India Company and His Highness Maharajah Raghojee Bhooslah' was signed in 1826 (Aitchison 1909: 425). Also see Wink 1986.

zamindari.³⁹ Communications after the battle described the establishment of peace in the zamindari and the return of the cultivators to their farms.⁴⁰

The British position was that the Patna villages were unlawfully acquired by the previous zamindar of Borasambar. According to the latter 120 villages were gifted to his father by the raja of Patna for loyal service rendered in the wars against the Marathas. The Borasambar zamindar, Ramdayal Bariha had told Major Roughsedge that the 120 villages under dispute had been given to his father Bhagwant Bariha, by the Raja of Patna for holding back and repulsing the Marathas. He had denied being the subject of Patna by stating that he recognized only the Raja of Berar (Marathas) as his overlord and paid a tribute of 500 Rupees directly to him.⁴¹ On the issue of large arrears in his tribute payment to the Marathas, he had said he would pay it eventually. The testimony of the zamindar reveals the rapidly changing alliances during periods of regime change and the tendency of local zamindars to seek recognition from the latest paramount authority in return for maintaining their existing rights and autonomy.

A series of communication were exchanged between the military commanders in charge of administering the eastern and western Mahanadi kingdoms and East India Company's Governor General in Council⁴² at the Fort William regarding the necessity of the proposed expedition against Borasambar instead of 'tact and diplomacy'. Among the justifications given for the military action was also the reference to the attacking, plunder and capturing of villages in Maratha ruled Chattisgarh by the Borasambar Raja, Bhagwunt Bariha and his kinsman, the

³⁹ Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 17th April, 1819/ From E.Roughsedge, Political Agent, to Mr.Secretary Metcalfe, 22nd February 1819.

⁴⁰ Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India, Bengal/Political Department.No.22/ Operations against the Zemindar of Boorah Sambah/Extract of the Political Letter from Bengal dated 29th March 1820.

⁴¹ Peabody (1991: 40) describes a similar situation in the 18th century kingdom of Kota in Rajasthan where *jagirdars* often claimed that their rights over the territory was independent of the rights of the Maharao's right by reference to the paramount powers of first the Mughal and then the Maratha.

⁴² Bengal Political Consultations/ 19th January 1819/ From Major.E. Roughsedge commanding N126 South West Frontier to John Adams Esq. Chief Secretary to the Government, 15th December 1818.

zamindar of Sonakhan in 1778.⁴³ Moreover it was rumoured that the zamindar kept company with the notorious bands of Pindaris. It seemed clear that one of the obvious British objectives for engaging in military action was enforcing the recognition of their presence in order to negotiate tribute payment and concessions like the construction of the postal route. The broader objective was to diminish the war making capacities of clan based zamindaris by securing allies among their adversaries, in this case the Raja of Patna. The Borasambar zamindar was described as the head of a *'very savage and warlike caste called Binjhvars on whom no dependence with safety could be laid.'*⁴⁴ In order to convince his superiors who were reluctant to engage in yet another 'rural battle', Major Roughsedge had drawn attention to the fact that:

'...Crippling the power of the Borasamber zamindar, and increasing that of his feudal chief the Rajah of Patna, who reduced as he has been by misfortune to great poverty and weakness is a man universally respected and distinguished for his attachment to the British Government.'(Ibid)

In Orissa, the ruling zamindars were heads of their caste groups in the territories controlled by them.⁴⁵ The high dependence and close ties of local kings on zamindaris based in hills and forests was a subject of much discussion and consternation among colonial administrators (Padel 2000). Similarly the loyalty and solidarity of clansmen towards their zamindars was a source of concern. Contemporary writers argued that the authority of the Central Indian kingdoms was intrinsically low through 'a political compromise between the authority of the tribe and the authority of a king' (Wills 1919:235). While Wills (1919) had attributed the 'feudal' elements of the Chattisgarh state system as imported by Rajputs, Fox (1971) and

⁴³ IOL/Bengal Political Consultations/19th January 1819: From Major.E. Roughsedge commanding N126 South West Frontier to John Adams Esq. Chief Secretary to the Government, 15th December 1818

⁴⁴ Extract Bengal Political Consultations, 17th April, 1819/ From E.Roughsedge, Political Agent, to Mr.Secretary Metcalfe, 22nd February 1819

⁴⁵ 'The Military chiefs of Sumbhulpoor and its independent states are Gonds and the majority of the inhabitants are of that caste of Boad, Konds of Patna including independent states, Konds, Gonds and Beenjooars, the latter being chiefly confined to Bora Samber, of Surgooja, Jushpoor, Oodeypoor and Korea, Gonds, Koorwas and Kawrs, the Gonds being most and Koura least numerous.' - Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 1st October 1832/No.107. From the Officiating Political Agent of the Southwest Frontier

Stern (1988), have shown how Rajput systems in North India, had enough tribal attributes to have become subjects of evolutionary debates in the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ This situation was not exceptional to inland Orissa. Elsewhere in medieval northern India, lineage and genealogical organization was a significant aspect of the political structure of local kingdoms (Fox 1971:138, Wills 1919).⁴⁷ Under the Mughals zamindari rights were spread over parganas and held by arms bearing groups who belonged to a single caste. But in case of Orissa, similar political organisation and practise was attributed to the intrinsic predatory nature of forest dwelling tribes (see Skaria 1999).

3.6 Zamindari Rebellions, Capitulation and Accommodation:

One important change brought about by the late nineteenth century British administration, was as Wink (1986) has argued, the end of the Mughal style 'fitna' alliances between and within local kingdoms that dissolved the ties of friendship, kinship and rivalries between and within local kingdoms and its segments and connected them with the sole authority of the colonial government. The other was the creation of 'eminent lineages...separated off as domesticated aristocracy' (Bayly1988: 140). The third was the identification of the clan-based groups in the zamindari as aboriginals or tribes, distinct from Hindu rulers and castes based on theories of 'social evolutionism'.

'Anthropology was a vital element in British rule of the Konds.... because it legitimized British rule from the side of science by defining Konds as a 'primitive tribe' who stood to benefit from 'enlightened government.' In the 1900s the Konds and other Central Indian tribes were safely under British rule and anthropologized' (Padel 2000: 243, 254).

⁴⁶ Stern (1988:31): also writes about the original 'feudal-tribal' debate between Lyall and Todd about the Rajput system which could not be settled satisfactorily. Stern calls Lyall's interpretation of Todd's famous annals of Rajputana where he theorises the tribal origins of Rajputs – an example of the application of mid-nineteenth century evolutionary theory based on Maine's Ancient Law published in 1861 – a kind of stage theory – of tribal system passing into feudal military.

⁴⁷ According to Stern (1988:46), C.U Wills' (1933) account: 'A report on the Land tenures and special Powers of certain Thikanedars of the Jaipur State' insisted on the primarily feudal nature of ties between Rajput warriors despite some residual clan-elements and was a work of 'radical historical revision'. Wills' particular interpretation of the Jaipur political system provided the rationale for British administrative advance since it argued that 'the bond between the ruler and the thikanedar was no more than a simple lease' (ibid: 258).

Colonial anthropology about adivasis reinforced negative stereotypes about them. To be a legitimate ruler therefore the newly ordained kings needed to demonstrate Hindu credentials and create appropriate social distance from their affiliations and affinity for clan-based forest dwelling groups. However it was considered best to subjugate clan based groups by accommodating and educating the holders of multiple centres of power in western Orissa rather than attempting unilateral centralization. This policy resulted perhaps from the widespread rebellions in the region (1849-1870) caused by the perceived losses in warrior status (Bayly 1988).

In 1849 when the British acquired Sambalpur, the most important kingdom in the Mahanadi valley (citing the doctrine of lapse), the region was engulfed in explosive rebellion. Sambalpur had the wealthiest khalsa in the region, due to its agricultural land, mineral resources and river trade.⁴⁸ The zamindaris of Sambalpur were key players in this rebellion (1849-1860), dismissing British claims of absence of heir to the kingdom and asserting their rights to appoint the rightful king. They were seeking among other things to regain territories that had been encroached by the British appointed regimes in the previous decade (Mishra 1986). As Bayly (1988:148) has argued the loss of status of warrior castes was an important incentive for the rebellion of 1857. Forested Patna had served as the refuge area for rebels during this time and assisted the British under threats of fines and confiscation. The Borasambar zamindar's kinsman in the east, zamindari of Ghes, played a significant role in this rebellion and was sentenced to death. Another kinsman, in the western zamindari of Sonakhan was also sentenced to death for raiding grain stores during the 1857 rebellion (Shrivastav 1978). At the end of the rebellion, most zamindaris were restituted as a gesture of conciliation and continuity. But the formation of the British districts of Sambalpur and Chattisgarh and the suppression of zamindari rebellion in the region signalled the clear emergence of the new imperial authority and change in political practise. Reports written in 1862 formally put words to the expected roles and relations of the local kingdoms and zamindaris under British rule. Patna became a 'feudatory-state' while Borasambar was designated a zamindari, to

⁴⁸ '...The Mahanadi...Everywhere navigable throughout the Tributary States by flat bottomed boats of about twenty five tons burden, it affords a magnificent trade route into Central India.' (Hunter 1872:65)

be administered by the district of Sambalpur. What happened to the Binjhals of Borasambar zamindari and did they cease to practise dissidence?

The Court of Wards administered Borasambar zamindari from 1885-1905.⁴⁹ During this period the income from zamindari increased dramatically. But Binjhals faced stiff competition from already present and migrant groups of sedentary cultivators, moneylenders, and liquor traders. Binjhals who continued as village headmen were severely indebted by the pressures and expectations of the new revenue systems. In 1882, in a surprising move by the Court of Wards, Binjhal headmen were given protection by special legislation to prevent them from losing their position to moneylenders. However by 1900, in the most fertile areas of the zamindari the Binjhals formed only a quarter of the local population. Binjhals retained some control only in the western parts of the zamindari that was hillier and more forested and inhabited by the direct lineage of the Borasambar zamindars. But a series of devastating famines (1899-1900) wreaked havoc on the less intensively cultivated west, further diminishing Binjhal population. The zamindar of Borasambar selected and trained by the Court of Wards continued the program of the British district administration from 1905, creating the right environment for agrarian productivity, while maintaining the appearance of continuity with the legitimate traditions of the past.

Many Binjhal headmen lost the headman-ship of fertile villages during this zamindar's rule. By then law courts and appeal to the zamindar and not warfare were the approved means of settling disputes in the region. Impoverished and grumbling Binjhal clansmen often harassed by zamindari officials nurtured controversial stories around the legitimacy of the Court of ward's selected zamindar that persists in oral narratives. One that I came across frequently during fieldwork was about how the real heirs to the throne were poisoned by the wicked dewan (minister) and an imposter was made zamindar. Reports from the Court of Wards, discuss the demise of two sons of the previous zamindar due to ill health before an eligible cousin, who

⁴⁹ IOR/V/24/2568: Management by Government of Private Estates in the Central Provinces / Resolution on the Management by Government of Private Estates in the Central Provinces during the year ending September 1886 - 1898.

was also being trained at the Raipur prince's college was chosen to be the zamindar. Characteristically the Binjhals, who held the position of the king in high respect, associated their losses to the interference of outsiders in the shape of the 'wicked official' and an imposter posing as the zamindar. But in British ruled western Orissa what justified the changed situation of the Binjhals was also the symbolic separation and hierarchies between rulers and subjects that was not mediated, moderated or dependent on kinship but expressed on the basis of caste-status. Zamindari subjects like the Binjhals, previously identified as the kinsmen of zamindars and chief, were described in administrative reports as 'aboriginals' or 'primitive tribes' outside or inferior to Hindu castes, and their tribal-ness was confirmed by their generic poverty, poor cultivation skills and inability to manage land. W.W Hunter's treatise published in 1872, describes the province of Orissa as consisting 'geographically and politically of two distinct tracts, the rich delta spread out its swamps and rice fields from the mountains to the sea; the hill country stretched backwards into Central India' (Hunter 1872: 64).⁵⁰ At the same time rulers increasingly chose to establish themselves as high-caste Hindus by spreading sedentary cultivation and extending patronage to Brahmans and writing grand myths of origin.

3.7 Gazetteer Myths and Tribal Narratives: Competing principles of Kingship

In the origin myths of 'feudatory states' of Orissa drawn from vamcavalis (genealogies), court literature and accounts of Brahman priests, local kings were strangers of high status, Rajputs from north India who had conquered and subordinated tribal inhabitants to establish a kingdom (Schnepel 2002). Tribal stories from eastern India suggest that kingship in forested Orissa was premised not in the unilateral conquest of original inhabitants by stranger-outsiders but obtained through the support and collaboration of powerful local groups. Such stories provides us with an alternative framework to understand how forest dwelling groups viewed themselves both as members of land controlling kin based groups as well as subjects of local kings and how they expressed their roles and claimed their rights

⁵⁰ Historian Susan Bayly describes W.W Hunter as 'one of the earliest exponents of the new anthropological methodologies within the Indian civil service. Hunter's extravagantly written *Annals of Rural Bengal* published in 1868, portrays the Bengal region as a living ethnological battleground. Its social order, he proclaimed, was shaped by a history of titanic warfare between ancient Sanskrit-speaking 'Aryans' and the rude 'aboriginal races' who had been overrun in the 'primitive time' by the bearers of superior 'Aryan civilization' (1999:134).

within local kingdoms. Perhaps these can also be placed within the framework of 'indigenous conceptions of sovereignty and authority' that were lost or devalued when the British elevated 'Brahmanical formulations to a hegemonic text undergirding the whole of Hindu society.' (Raheja 1988:498). In Raheja's argument, the sovereignty of both Hindu and Muslim rulers was defined by transactions around the gift. 'Through giving of gifts the rulers ritually incorporated the subjects within his domain.' In the tribal narratives of shared-sovereignty from east-central India the notion of gift giving is important but the direction of the transaction is reversed, justifying the presence of the king but defining his limited rights as derived from a gift made from the rightholders of clan territories.

After the formal end of the warfare in the Mahanadi valley and the restitution of local kingdoms, a number of accounts or stories about the origin of these kingdoms were recorded. The official histories written by the early colonial administration about the rulers of the reborn-kingdoms were based on collected 'oral traditions'. These were eminently useful for providing the 'pragmatic charter' of Company's rule by a retrospective legitimation of their political actions (Cohn 2001[1977]: 208). The account collected by Major Impey, a military administrator in 1863, mentions how it was customary for the king of Patna to sit on the lap of the zamindar of Borasambar when the turban of kingship was tied on his head.

'Notwithstanding the smallness originally of the area of the zamindari, the proprietor was a man of some importance. He was the chief of his caste-men, Bhinjwal; and, on the occasion of a new maharaja being raised to the gudee it was his special duty to take the latter on his lap and fold over his head the turban of the state.' (Impey 1863:7)

For the British administrator this ritual or custom was simply a reminder of the past status and importance of Borasambar or the modest origins of the kings of Patna but irrelevant to the changing context of regional kingship. Neither the zamindar of Borasambar nor the king of Patna highlighted this aspect of their past relationship choosing instead other grandiose narratives that served their changed situation as autonomous kingdoms. When Borasambar emerged as an independent zamindari it also developed its own origin myth. In Borasambar's origin myth, says one account,

turban of kingship is tied to the eldest brother among the twelve brothers who received the zamindari as a gift from a deity and a later a great king through performing remarkable feats of marksmanship with their bows and arrows.

But, the Borasambar zamindar's role in the coronation of the Patna kings is also echoed in the narratives of present adivasi groups in the regional neighbourhood such as the Kondhs in Kalahandi (Bailey 1960), the Bhumij in the Chotanagpur kingdom of Barabhum (Sinha 1987), Keonjhar (Mahapatra 1987) and Mayurbhanj (Hunter 1872). In the installation ceremony of the Keonjhar Rajas, the Bhuiya mahanayak assumed the posture of a horse on whose back the king rode and when ascending his new throne the king would sit on the lap of another Bhuiya headman who represented the throne (Mahapatra 1987: 21). In the Kondhmal area of Orissa, the warrior caste village or mutha headmen were called raja and carried on their shoulders by the Konds on important ceremonial occasions. The Kondmal Konds also described their role in the tying of the turban of the king of Boudh during his investment ceremony (Bailey 1960:179). These rituals do not describe the subjection of forest dwelling people as subjects of great king but speak about guardian-ship, king making and alliance. According to Padel (2000) the Konds did not view themselves as subjects of the king but considered themselves responsible for appointing and dismissing the kings when they outlived their usefulness or stepped outside their roles. The Hindu kings were the means with which the Kondhs 'tasted the outside world' (Padel 2000:17). These were I argue ways of linking kinship with the King to justify the latter's rights on clan based groups. In some western Orissa kingdoms, such as Kalahandi, the king traditionally married a girl from the Kondhs, and thus became incorporated in the dominant lineage, like a sister's son (Cobden-Ramsay 1910). But what needs to be also mentioned is that the kings of such places were almost always strangers who never belonged to any locally dominant tribe.

Profusion of stories about the rearing of kings in the forest by clan based groups and the prerogative of tribesmen in appointing kings had led colonial era ethnologists to argue that perhaps the kings of highland Orissa were attempting to hide their humble

tribal origin (Dalton 1872, Mohapatra 1962:35, Cobden-Ramsay 1910).⁵¹ F.G Bailey interpreted these practises as denoting the subordination, deference and dependence of the Konds on their Rajas (1960). In contrast Mahapatra (1987) argues that such ritual contained claims of guardian ship. In the local traditions of Keonjhar, their prince was 'stolen' by the Bhuiya tribe from the family of the Rajas of Mayurbhanj. The 'horseplay' during accession ceremony was a reminder of the times when the Bhuiya reared the stolen 'child-prince' in the forest.

The above stories of kingship resemble the themes of 'stranger-aristocracies', the invited guests and rulers of chief-less societies described in the context of the Alur society (Southall 1970: 229) and Fiji (Sahlins 1981). Sahlins (1981) formulation about the 'stranger-king' in the context of Fiji throws a useful light on the nature of kingship in forested Orissa. According to Sahlins (1981:111-125) the great chiefs and kings of political society were not of the people they ruled. 'By the local theories of origin they are strangers, just as the draconian feats by which they come to power are foreign to the conduct of the 'real people' or 'true sons' of the land'. The Fijian nobility were styled 'child chiefs' (gone turaga), while the native owners of the land were the 'elders' (quase). The relation was that of offspring to ancestor and established by the gift of the woman. Moreover kingship did not imply loss of control of the tribe over their land since 'at the rituals of installation, the chief is invested with the 'rule' or 'authority' (lewa) over the land, but the land itself is not conveyed to him. Specifically the 'soil' (quele) is reserved to its 'native owners' (nau taukei)'. Schnepel (1995) has argued that the relationship between the South Orissa jungle kings and the tribal inhabitants was not one of antagonism, oppressive colonization or displacement. The kings he argues, required the cooperation of his tribal subjects in order to exist with a degree of autonomy with respect to their overlords, the greater kings. In the pre-colonial period the important role of clan based forest dwellers in the generation, maintenance and perpetuation of the small kingdoms of western Orissa, was a norm rather than an exception (Schnepel 1995, 2002, Padel 2000).

⁵¹ The 'kidnapping of a Chief's son' is also mentioned in the context of Alur society. 'A chief's son was spoken of as being kidnapped and carried bodily to the clan of his destiny. This is symbolic; the kidnapping expresses the urgency of the clan to get him, and the carrying expresses their reverence for him and is linked with the actual carrying of major chiefs on the shoulders of courtiers at their accession.' (Southall 1953:182).

The above interpretation allows us to view the stories about the kings of inland Orissa differently. Brahmanical kingdom myths seldom recognised the agency of clan-based groups considering such associations as un-prestigious. In such stories kings were always high caste outsiders who had vanquished tribes to gain their kingdom. Similar stories exist about the rejection and redefinition of the role of forest dwelling groups such as the Bhils in Rajput states in the late eighteenth century (Skaria 1999:131, Bayly 1999). In the twelve-village story from Mahulkonda, the king of Patna's minister had described the Binjhals as 'uncivilized' and questioned their role in tying the king's turban, provoking retaliation. But the combination of brahmanical myths and Victorian anthropology, produced narrative about forest kings in which tribes were inevitably subjected and subdued because they represented not a simultaneous or collaborative necessity of local political practise but an earlier stage or level of political organisation.

Major Impey collected the mythical story about the origin of Patna kingdom in 1863. This myth is based on two different pieces of eighteenth century court literature (Singh Deo 2004). In this story the first king of Patna, Ramai Deo is described as a stranger of Rajput lineage from north India whose mother had sought refuge in the forests of western Orissa. She had been provided shelter and her son adopted by a Brahman minister of Patna. On growing up Ramai Deo had first become a councillor, inheriting the position from his adopted father and later secured the rule of Patna by defeating or killing the group of eight councillors who were the original rulers of the kingdom. In some versions Ramai Deo marries the daughter of a king of Orissa, thus securing his position even further. Stories about the eight councillors (ashta mallik) who selected their king annually after spinning a lemon are common in the Mahanadi valley area and appear in the kingdom myths of several feudatory states (Schnepel 2002).⁵² The Marathas had an 'Ashta Pradhan' or council of eight ministers including the Peshwa, and this motif may have been borrowed from them (Wink 1986: 30). In a later account published in the Sambalpur gazetteer, the Rajput queen, who was the mother of the first king of Patna was sheltered at first by a Binjhal tribesmen in the forest with whose support he acquired the kingship of Patna (O'Malley 1909). As military ascendancy over tribals increased...it became less important for local kings

⁵² See for instance, in the origin myth of the kingdom of Parlakimedi discussed by Schnepel (2002:259).

to justify their rule over tribal even as it became essential for them to legitimize it in the eyes of the British (Padel 2000:130). Moreover in the colonial period the ideological practises of Western Orissa feudatory kings were geared towards locating themselves within a constellation of similar kingdoms in the neighbourhood and elsewhere in the country. They were 'a horizontally defined new social class' (Price 1996:41) who were in the process of defining the forested past as primitive and barbaric. Ironically the period in which warfare lost its utility and legitimacy in forest kingdoms, being fort born' (garhjat) idiom of competitive claim for status among the local rajas and many employed court historians to fight over the right to style themselves as ruler of 'athara garh' or eighteen forts (Banerji 1931, Mazumdar 1925).

British rule made it mandatory for the Borasambar zamindar to leave his fortress in the Borasambar hills and reside in the palace constructed in a market village called Padampur. In their correspondence, the Court of Wards voiced their criticism and disapproval of the interference of Binjhal clansmen with the young zamindar. That Rajendra Singh had distanced himself from his Binjhal kinsmen and subjects by adopting a new identity can be inferred from Mahulkonda village's record of rights drawn in 1925 where the Raja was no longer described by his caste name: Binjhal, or title name: bariha, but as Bindhyagiri basi (inhabitant of Vindhyachal), indicating a king who presides over a community of diverse social groups. Zamindari inhabitants were well known for their hostility towards Brahmans. A transformed climate in Borasambar zamindari can also be ascertained from the patronage extended to Brahmans by the zamindar in the eastern fertile area. In the Borasambar origin myth, a new symbolic element was created, one that connected them to the King of Puri, a symbol of unified and Hindu Orissa during the colonial period (Kulke 2001).

3.9 Conclusion: Rulers to Bandits and impoverished forest dwellers

The social decline of the Borasambar Binjhals, was not an outcome of their effective resistance or lack of it against the discourses and interventions of the new imperial authority or even their losses or victories in specific battles but linked to the symbolic redundancy of arms bearing clan-based groups and war-making in western Orissa

that signalled the beginning of the end of the 'epoch of soldiers, nomads and tribesmen in India' (Bayly1988). The above narratives constructed from the archival accounts about Borasambar provides a window to the early nineteenth century landscape abounding in small battles, rebellions, administrative decisions and local accommodations that preceded the emergence of numerous brahmanical kingdoms (the feudatory-states) empowered by the British colonial administration in western Orissa against the agency of its own inhabitants and which worked over time to control, isolate, forget and marginalize its forested past.

This chapter does not provide a story of unidirectional conquest by the colonial regime over beleaguered tribal people but shows how the end of warfare and the promotion of agrarian settlement in a forest area like Borasambar, had provided diverse opportunities to act to particular social groups while diminishing the kinds of agency that had been dependent through necessity or choice to the political practises of forest kingdoms. Hills and forests were considered uncontrollable, un-taxable places in pre-colonial India as mentioned in medieval literature and poetry (Sontheimer 1993:83). But practises such as raiding and plundering were not limited to these ecological locations (Tambs-Lyche 2005). Attacks and raids were recognized ways of enforcing claims, not necessarily a propensity of particular social groups or the effect of unstable political regimes in the late eighteenth century. The perceptions and decisions of the emergent colonial administration in western Orissa was shaped to some extent by the agency displayed by the numerous rulers and inhabitants (often related to their rulers by ties of kinship) of forest kingdoms of western Orissa, who throughout the nineteenth century, tried to preserve and consolidate their existing rights and improve their situation, amidst the uncertainties and turmoil of broader regime change. Such agency has been documented and described by historians as the 'enactment of wildness' by forest polities (Skaria 1999) and their carefully maintained apparent hostility to outsiders (Arnold 1988, Bates 2006).

In his historical research from western India, Ajay Skaria (1999) argues how the centrality of wildness in political practise of pre-colonial India got increasingly identified with the intrinsic nature of the wild and the tribal Bhil who were pushed to the margins, during the colonial period. While Skaria's focus is on Bhil agency in

adapting and reinforcing this attribute of wildness as an oppositional, non-brahmanical practise of kingship, other historians have argued that characteristics such as 'wildness' were central to all warrior identities in medieval India (such as the Rajputs, Marathas, Kolis and Muslim mercenaries) (Tambs-Lyche 2005:187) or the plundering bands of Pindaris in Central India in the early nineteenth century (McEldowney 1966, 1971). Different groups may have used raiding for different purposes. For some like the Pindaris, plundering was a profession, while for others like the Maratha soldiers it was the means of enforcing a tribute or revenue share (McEldowney 1966, 1971). British rule effectively terminated such political practises throughout India. The end of warfare was accompanied by freezing the rights of the zamindars and the boundaries of their territories. The stable but curtailed rights that were created from this process helped to change the principles of rule over a period of time from one dependent on alliances and dispersed structures of power and endemic warfare.

Alternative discourses of pre-colonial kingship among forest dwelling communities provides some understanding of the vitality of kin based groups and their strong bargaining power in the border kingdoms of medieval central India and the nature of their marginality that began with the colonial period. This enables us to revise the notion of the beleaguered 'tribe' that has prevented identifying the social groups described through such categories as important participants in the pre-colonial state systems of Central India without using the familiar and stereotyped images of subordinate subjects or rebellious subalterns.⁵³

The Borasambar zamindar was selected and empowered by the British court of wards, creating the groundwork for the emergence of an autonomous little king among the Binjhals. Initially the Binjhal clans kept their hold in the local society by retaining positions of headman-ship of villages with demarcated boundaries and fixed revenue demands. This was perhaps due to the strategies of dissidence

⁵³ This point of view has been showed to be inaccurate in various contexts. For instance, Van Schendel (1990) and (Bal and Van Schendel 2002) have shown how the hill people of the Chittagong, viewed as tribals by their neighbouring community and outsiders were a heterogeneous group of people who far from having rigid boundaries or primitive residues were linked in extensive networks of trade and tribute with distant states. It was the interaction of these groups with the cultural models presented by the neighboring state systems that created their cultural distinctiveness. In the context of India, see (Guha 1999, Corbridge 2004). This research engages further with some of these arguments in chapter 4.

demonstrated by them throughout the early nineteenth century or the assurances given by them to discard their forest dwelling ways. Ensuring that the Binjhals continued in official positions such as village headmen may have also helped to maintain a semblance of continuity with the past for nervous early British administrators who feared if not a dramatic reprisal by disaffected Binjhal clans, at least the equally terrible vision of a depopulated zamindari embracing its wilderness. The success of British pacification process in Borasambar zamindari was marked by the rapid settlement of new villages and increasing in-migration. But it was only when the Binjhals lost the positions of village headman-ship to the enterprising farmers and traders from valley areas in the most productive parts of the zamindari that the balance of power swung away and their ability as a social group to avail of emergent resources and opportunities in forest areas got severely curtailed relative to the others in the local field. The changing policies around village gountiahi (headman-ship), struggles over controlling these kingly positions and the memories and interpretations of such happenings in land disputes are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 4: 'He sold land that was not his to sell': Idioms of right in land dispute accounts

The objective of this chapter is to understand the idioms in which villagers remembered and justified their claims over agricultural land in tandem with a brief historical discussion about the colonial era legislation around the rights, roles and eligibility of village headmen in order to understand how adivasi marginality emerged in Borasambar villages amidst changes and continuities in the rules and patterns of access to land resources. Fertile land is scarce in hilly inland Orissa where a majority of people practise precarious rain-fed agriculture. Not surprisingly poverty is synonymous with those who are without secure rights over adequate cultivable land and forced to lead itinerant, dependent and nomadic existence. Land disputes are a common occurrence and waged in the idiom of agnatic kinship. In these expressions harm is both caused to and derived from close agnates, sometimes aided by unscrupulous external agents. Agnatic kinship though not reducible to debates about land ownership, finds itself at the centre of the agrarian claims and insecurities around land recounted in numerous interconnected memories by interrelated people. Nature and frequency of land disputes are an effect of a range of factors: demographic pressure, the custom of equal partition at inheritance, unequal distribution of land and ecological limitations of intensive cultivation. The land claims made by the Binjhals, through their stories about old and new village headman, are not very different in focus except that they also serve to open a route toward a different time and path of analysis. The specific disputes that this chapter is concerned with are those over land that was in the past known as the *bhogra*. These land shares consisted of the largest and often most fertile portions in Borasambar villages and associated with position of village headman. Land claims woven around the definition of legitimate rights to the *bhogra* land, offer important historical insight into changes in the distribution of land, meaning of property and the nature of privileged tenure and customary rights in the local society.

The disputes around headman's position illuminates aspects of broader processes that shaped the agrarian landscape and the redistribution of social power in the local society after the pacification battles and the reconstitution of the zamindari in the late

nineteenth century (chapter 2). Contentions over land resources reveal the nature and underpinning factors of social and economic inequalities in rural Borasambar that has important bearing on the way in which wealth and indigence has been experienced in the recent past. The point here is not to attempt a comparison between land rights that existed in the pre-colonial period and how these were subsequently transformed to the detriment of the Binjhals. What little information is available from the early nineteenth century refers to Rajput style military-administrative divisions (Wills 1919) and that in most of the zamindari area the dominant practise was that of extensive shifting cultivation interspersed with small settled farms and forest dependent livelihood (Grant 1870, Court of Wards Reports 1887-1898⁵⁴). But in the Binjhal headman stories, the reference point from which the present is measured is approximately the late nineteenth century, when the British administration initiated the settlement operations and created new rules for the management of villages, many of which were new villages carved out of forestland. While little can be said here about the rights that were affected when these villages were created, the early changes were implemented with the involvement of Binjhal headman lineages and families. Thus when Binjhals describe their losses and poverty, it is always in comparison with the power and prosperity of the headman and praja families of the revenue villages that emerged with the security of tenure, expansion of cultivation and increasing price of agricultural commodities, just when their own lineages were moving gradually to occupy the edge of this process. The extent of secure land rights that lineages obtained during this period of agrarian expansion determined to a great extent the relative economic fortunes of the descendants. Hence the loss of headmanship and later the inability to obtain alternate land that was equally valuable and secure is viewed as the primary cause behind the impoverishment of Binjhal lineages. The marginality of the Binjhal headman families who represented the older regime and methods of land control and use, symbolises the subordination of forest based political and economic practises to the demands and profits of revenue farming, a process that was aided in various ways by the colonial district administration but for which credit must also be given to the enterprise of emergent farmer-landlords and the zamindar of Borasambar.

⁵⁴ IOR/V/24/2568. Management by Government of Private Estates in the Central Provinces

Pre-colonial land tenures have been described aptly as a 'forest of co-existent and cross-cutting rights' that derived authority not just from a centralized bureaucratic state but also from multiple sources and principles. 'Hereditary land rights' in pre-colonial India was not a legal claim to ownership of the soil but signified 'customary authority to exercise power over persons who resided thereon (Frykenberg 1969).' Such tenures were about control of land and rights to shares of the produce rather than absolute ownership (Cohn 1969:469). In contrast the British 'cultural legacy exalted the basic value of unqualified possession' (Washbrook 1981). The colonial administration interpreted and modified diverse pre-existing land rights in India especially through innovative interpretation of indigenous institutions. Local zamindars were expected to divert their interest from warfare and invest in agriculture, enhance political stability and ensure steady flow of revenue (Dirks 1987). However the legal and political environment created for the operation of market forces and penetration of capital had been contradictory leaving social groups with room to manoeuvre (Washbrook 1981 cited in Sivaramakrishnan 1995:12, Dirks 1987:23). But attribution of unilateral agency to the colonial state is considered problematic since colonial policies had worked within a wider field of social forces (Bayly 2008:14-15) and may have been understood and experienced by villagers as different kinds of over-lordships in continuity with pre-colonial times (Mosse 2003:93). Land disputes from Borasambar villages reveal dimensions of change that affected the exclusive rights of pre-colonial land-controlling groups like the Binjhals of Borasambar but these effects were mediated by a variety of factors that suggested continuity, such as the perceived autonomous powers of the Binjhal zamindar and change such as the growing usage of the concept of legal rights and British courts for dispute settlement (Price 1996:40). Increasing stratification that grew upon differential ownership of land and the ability to appropriate the powers of new institutions also ensured compliance from disempowered and dependent groups about the values of changing use of land-resources and the significance of legal rights. Thus processes through which the forest dwelling practises were made malleable and harnessed to release land for farming and creating wealth, were gradual and contradictory and based on external laws and local initiative, such that the clear separation of past and present, loyalties and allegiances and accounting of losses and gains, are difficult. Although forest dwellers emerged as clear victims in

the long run, at the outset, some withstood competition from traders and cultivators and revenue pressures of the state and persisted in holding land through the privileged tenures of headman and priest, though in relatively poorer lands and villages.

4.1 Land Disputes and Claims of Kinship

Disputes over land were very common in Mahulkonda. Some drew upon memories that clung resiliently to the landscape constituted by the small laboriously cleared, forest fields. Most families cultivated portions of inherited land that continued to appear in legal records in their un-fragmented entirety under common title or *ek-jamali patta* of long dead ancestors. Dispute narration, arbitration and discussions of unresolved claims ensured a constant conversation between land records and family stories, connecting village incidents with state intervention and the times and deeds of distant ancestors. Controversial stories were usually 'betrayal of trust' incidents that occurred when individuals sold their land shares to people outside the jama (close agnatic kin group). Transactions in land by women evoked the sharpest criticism since this was interpreted as an attack on the rights of agnates. The disproportionate power of zamindars and gountias to push their points of view irrespective of the rightness of their conduct was often contrasted with the limited capacity of poor villagers. Much of the war was fought through and over fading pieces of paper that traced the permanent boundaries and served as the mark of official guarantee to land rights.

The ideology of agnatic kinship (jama) intertwined with the facts of legal record, were the two most influential idioms through which rights to land were expressed in Borasambar villages. A third claim, resorted to often by poorer villagers but which had feeble chances of obtaining legal certitude was that of ancestral occupation, of being 'khunt-kata' a term synonymous with settling villages or simply, clearing forest from land. What follows is brief discussion of some of the typical disputes in Mahulkonda and neighbouring villages that would enable us to understand how the powerlessness of impoverishment was grounded in insecure access to land and

expressed through influential discourses of rights to the jealously hoarded resource of agrarian land in forested Borasambar.

Betrayal by Brothers

In the late 1800s, a Kultha farmer escaping the persecution of rebellious Gonds in the khalsa villages of Mahanadi valley had arrived in Mahulkonda. His family had been welcomed, the story goes by the Binjhal gountia who had given, sold or allotted to him a large area of land in the outskirts of the village, to clear and develop as permanent fields for cultivation. The family had proceeded to fulfil the wishes of the headman and the zamindar and had created some of the most productive fields of the village. The old man (as ancestors are often called) had three sons. As was customary among the Kultha farmers of that period, to preserve family holding, one of the three sons was sent away to explore the villages in the zamindari of Khariar (Nuapada district), where land was believed to be equally plentiful and more fertile than Borasambar. Kulthas were reputed in the western Orissa region for making wealth from agriculture in the remotest forest villages. In this case though the migration strategy had not been successful. Left with no option, the migrant son had returned to Mahulkonda, only to find that his land share had not only been divided up between the two stay at home brothers but also recorded in their names. This incident they say, created a disentitled branch in the otherwise landed Kultha jama. Some families among them, became prosperous farmers while those from the landless branch struggled to overcome poverty for the next two generations.

Over the years questions about the missing share remained unsettled and unforgotten even as the farming families moved up and down the economic ladder. A fairly well to do descendant of the 'migrant-son' branch told me how he discovered that a 'case' had been duly filed by his great-grandfather and how when the sentence came a budi (ancestress) related to their family had taken away the papers and hidden them in a hollowed out bamboo in her sister's kitchen, presumably for safekeeping. She had not known how to read or write and was probably unaware of the judgement. Eventually the papers came into my informant's hands because he had married a daughter from that family. He had realised then that the judgement had been given in favour of his great grandfather. But land shares that would come

to them by pursuing the process was so miniscule that he had considered it useless to try and get the judgement enforced. Education and non-farming employment had ensured that his family had done better than the cultivators of their jama. But he was bitter about the past, remembering the hardships and humiliation that their family had experienced because of being denied their rightful share of land. In Borasambar villages it is not uncommon for agnates to feud bitterly over land shares or gaining from the vulnerability of a jama member. Requirements of sedentary cultivation, demographic pressure and dearth of new land encouraged competition over cultivable fields. Villagers tend to evaluate such incidents in terms that are simple: envy between brothers, betrayal of trust, arrogance of the rich and the illegitimate agency of women.

Agency of Women

About a hundred years ago, people say, that there had been an incident of violent death in Mahulkonda. Two brothers of the Kallar jama, Debo and Parago had exchanged blows over a humble Custard Apple tree that marked the boundary between their rice fields, leading to the death of one. The Kallar jama, had been the second largest landholding group in Mahulkonda after the headman's family in 1906 (Village Record of Rights). But they had lost a great deal of their land in the generation that preceded Debo and Parago. The grandfathers of Debo and Parago had been two brothers. While first had two sons and a daughter, the second had three daughters. On the death of the second brother, his daughters had decided to exercise their legal rights of inheritance over jama land. They had not only registered the land in their names but had later sold this. This was an act of unusual agency for women to have displayed in the patriarchal Borasambar society of the early twentieth century. A wealthy Brahman man, from a nearby village, also a Mahulkonda son in law is believed to have played an important role in this process since the land was eventually sold to him. The Kallar agnates, who viewed themselves and not the married daughters to be the legitimate heirs of jama land, had been furious. Over the years complicated, inconclusive legal battles were fought. Kallars though landed were neither as wealthy nor educated as the Brahman, had lost almost half the jama land. In the years following the sale, the Kallar men had repeatedly refused to acknowledge the transfer of ownership, by sowing paddy on the disputed land. They

had suffered beatings by the Brahman's hired thugs. Mahulkonda Kallars had become considerably land poor after that incident and nursed a strong enmity towards Brahmans though in everyday conversations they put the blame on the women of their jama. The Kallar story contains a prominent theme in land disputes that is framed in terms of gender: women's 'illegitimate' claims usually assisted or coerced by dishonest others, led to the loss of agnates. Often this is also a veiled way of criticising powerful people in the community. For supporting the unlikely agency of women in matters of land, were always unscrupulous wealthy men (chapter 8 provides women's viewpoint about issues of land). Villagers like to argue that such transactions being morally incorrect rarely benefitted anyone by describing how the Brahman had never been allowed to live in Mahulkonda by the angry Kallars and had sold the land at throwaway prices to a Kultha family, without cultivating it and had died shortly afterwards.

4.2 Stories about the Old Headman Families of Borasambar villages

The preceding details about village land disputes and kinship provide a backdrop for the most important land dispute in Mahulkonda and numerous villages of Borasambar over what used to be the village *bhogra* or *sir* land. The *bhogra* was the village gountia or headman's portion that was spread over a quarter of all land in Borasambar villages and contained some of the most fertile, closely cultivated and valley bottom rice fields in the village. Most remembered disputes over the *bhogra* date back to early 1900s, when the Borasambar zamindar auctioned rent-collecting rights over many villages thereby affecting the rights of headman families.⁵⁵ Stories of headman families refer directly to these events. As an outcome of this process, in many villages, at present, there were two sets of headman: the old (*juna*) and the new (*nua*). The former were usually Binjhals and the latter were primarily from agricultural or trader caste groups like the Kultha or Haldiya Teli. The differences of power and wealth between the old and new headman families were substantial and it

⁵⁵ Details of many Borasambar village headmanship contracts being cancelled by the zamindar are available in the following records in the Orissa state archives. Ac no. 20178 B&O DOC/Notes: Revenue department. Land Revenue file No.1V L/2 of 1915. Policy to be followed in dealing with proposals for the cancellation of the protected status of thikadars in zamindari villages in the district of Sambalpur under section 65A of the Central Provinces Land Revenue Act, 1881 (Act XVIII of 1881).

was surprising that the memories of the former had survived at all. For most villagers it was the past that had been lived. But for the Binjhals it was also evidence of the existence of former rights on the basis of which present claims over fertile land, could perhaps be forwarded if not sustained.

Land dispute narratives were moral evaluations that allocated blame not to the successors or new headman families but to the zamindar of Borasambar and can help us to understand how the redistribution of social, economic and political power in Borasambar, post the establishment of colonial rule, was understood not through a caste versus tribe discourse but as the moral disruption of a social order that was constituted by the hierarchies of kingship, kinship and gender. From the Binjhal point of view, the action of the zamindar led to their loss of status in the local society making them, the true rulers of the soil, subordinate not to 'superior' jati groups but to people whom they had considered no more than sahumars (traders and money lenders).

4.2.1 *Kaushilya Barihen's istafa*: How the Mahulkonda Barihas lost their land

In early 1990, a group of Binjhal men from Bariha pada had taken a walk down to the fertile expanse of bahal under the village tank. It was the peak of kharif agricultural season and the farm servants were ploughing the land. They had asked the farm servants to stop ploughing and had declared the land to be theirs. Police had been summoned and the Binjhals were imprisoned for disturbing peace in the village. For some who had witnessed the incident, the Binjhals were simply making trouble about land that their elders had sold or lost. For the Binjhals this incident was merely a strategic move to resume an old debate about the *bhogra* land of which they believed their family to be the rightful owners. They had been upset that after they had deliberately courted arrest, the court had not asked them about their land claim. Although the Binjhals had taken heart from the impact that their action had created in the village; they were aware of the difficulties of obtaining rights that had long been extinguished.

The descendants of the Mahulkonda old headman family were called barihas to distinguish them from Binjhals of non-headman jama. Barihas said that their trouble began when their ancestor Dakhin Singh's son Jogendra Singh, the gountia of Mahulkonda, died, childless. Jogendra Singh was chosen to be gountia because he was the 'lambardar', the representative of the eldest branch of their jama (lineage). After Jogendra's death, in 1917, his widow Kaushilya Barihen had expressed a desire to marry one of his younger brothers. The chosen person had refused her offer of marriage. Upset by this rebuff, Kaushilya had gone to the zamindar of Borasambar and offered the *istafa* of village gountiahi or resigned from the position of headmanship. The zamindar had accepted her offer. As compensation he had given Kaushilya land in another village and organised her marriage to his *khamari* (farm-worker). Later to emphasize the change in village leadership, the zamindar had come to Mahulkonda, people said, on his elephant and performed ceremonies that signalled the conversion of the village to a *khamar* (zamindar's domain land).

After this, the *bhogra* land had become the property of the zamindar. Apart from the headman's share, the Bariha jama did not have rights over any land in the village. This incident had in effect rendered their jama landless. A child born to their family that year was appropriately named Zabt Bariha: from Zabt or confiscation by powerful authority. In 1942, the zamindar had 'sold' the village headmanship to a Kultha man who belonged to the headman family of a nearby village. The rights to *bhogra* land had been transferred to this family. In the post-independent period, the *bhogra* land had escaped ceiling legislation and had remained fairly intact. But by early 2000, the descendants of the new headman family were selling small portions of the *bhogra* to land hungry farmers, fragmenting and scattering the rights to this land. This new development in the life history of the *bhogra*, would affect the course taken by the dispute.

In the past, the disinherited ancestors of the Bariha jama had sought British courts to press their claims and charges. Present villagers remembered how their ancestors had fought 'a case' with the zamindar in Sambalpur court. They believed that the decree by the court had been in their favour. But they had been too impoverished to get it implemented. Impassioned discussions and debates about the past that took place in the sun baked or rain soaked inner courtyards of the Bariha pada, veered

effortlessly from the realm of gifts and brotherhood towards courts, lawsuits and land records. Land settlement records from the early 1900s were dissected in these discussions as evidence to support their version of the dispute. The names of the settlement officers, Dewar and Hamid were like check-posts in their memory lane. It was between the second and the third land settlement operations, conducted by Dewar and Hamid (in 1906 and 1924 respectively) that the names of the brothers of Jogendra Singh Bariha, had disappeared from the village record of rights. Mahulkonda barihas had pointed out to me how the names of their jama elders, figured in the column that was marked 'dakhal' as evidence that their ancestors had continued to occupy the *bhogra*, after the zamindar had taken away the official position from them. In the language of the record their ancestors had become 'illegal' occupants of the *bhogra* land.

For the Mahulkonda barihas, rights to the *bhogra* (which by tradition was the first patch of land to have been settled), were associated not just with the individual who occupied the headman's position with respect to the zamindari administration but also the rights of agnates who had cleared, cultivated and settled the village. Since any male member of the agnatic group could become headman, death of Jogendra Singh without direct heir did not imply that there were no other contenders for the headman's position. Indeed what they could not accept was how the widow of the gountia could have both inherited and resigned the title when several male agnates or the legitimate rightholders were also present. But disinherited gountia jama was a greatly disempowered and fragmented group, lacking resources to counter the powerful zamindar. Disinherited agnates tried to resist zamindari occupation by disrupting the cultivation of the *bhogra*, several times in the past. Zamindari officials had responded in kind by cutting, burning and appropriating harvested crops. It was these acts that had taken the issue eventually to the British courts.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Copies of court orders preserved by the bariha family of Mahulkonda, mention some of these incidents. Suit no.160 of 1904, Copy of the order passed by the sub divisional magistrate Bargarh in Criminal case mis/...of 1918./ Copy of orders passed by the sub divisional magistrate Bargarh in mis. Case no. 79 of 1920/ T.suit no. 325 of 1918.

Mahulkonda barihas said that their grandfathers slowly starved ('bhukhe moruthile') as the zamindari officials burnt their crops, removed everything of value from their houses, carried away their weapons and even their 'tamba-patta' (copper plate deed) and initiated 'fouzdari' case upon them.⁵⁷ In the prolonged tussle with the zamindar, they could count on few influential praja witnesses to support their case in comparison to the zamindar who commanded loyalty among the wealthier non-Binjal praja community. Some of the latter were rewarded with positions in the zamindari administration after this event. Impoverished Barihas had started working as farm servants for wealthy praja cultivators who grew in power during the period when the village was administered as khamar⁵⁸ through expansion of cultivation and increasing price of agricultural commodities. When the new headman arrived on the scene in 1942, the already present wealthy praja community balanced and contested this new centre of power. Village rumours hold that it was the friction between these two powerful groups, new headman and wealthy praja that have re-mobilized the memories of the bariha family in recent times. But the assertiveness of the barihas in recent times can also be attributed to improved literacy and new found political voice as adivasi people. But as barihas discussed endlessly the thoughtlessness of Kaushilya, they also raised forgotten questions about multiple, inextinguishable, rights to land.

'What right did Kaushilya barihen have to surrender jama land? How could the raja sell that which had not belonged to him? The point is not whether we paid or did not pay malguzari. Mahulkonda belonged to us. It was our inam village, given to our great grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers (bua-aja, pan-aja). The raja was a Binjal like us, he was our brother but he betrayed us. Perhaps he was not really a Binjal. They say that the son of Bhagat bariha had been poisoned and the one who took his place and sold our village was an impostor.' (Field notes 2003)

Like other land disputes in the village, these assertions too emphasize the ideology of agnatic kinship and implicate the illegitimate agency of women. Here the

⁵⁷ See for example: Copy of the order passed by the sub divisional magistrate Bargarh in Criminal case mis/...of 1918.

⁵⁸ Khamar villages were kept by the zamindar as 'domain land' for the use of his immediate family and lineage. These were administered indirectly through farm servants and the revenue was collected using an official called 'muhuri'. In Mahulkonda, the muhuri was a Brahman whose family was the wealthiest in the village.

corrupting influence came from the powerful zamindar who was not truly a brother who had betrayed trust but an imposter posing as a brother.

4.2.2 Processes and Consequences of Losing Headmanships

The sense of enmity towards the long dead zamindar that descendants of old headman families nurse is not without material causes. Loss of headmanship contributed significantly to the landlessness of the Binjhals. Most Binjhals in the fertile villages of Borasambar did not have land rights. The Binjhal headman families were the exceptions to this rule. These families consisted of large agnatic groups, whose various members were the earliest settlers of the forest villages. They had invested in clearing operations and had cultivation rights on the bhogra. Village bhogra or sir land, depending on the size of the cultivated area of the village, could range between 100-800 acres of settled land consisting of established fields and within the vicinity of village water reservoir. With the end of their official headmanship positions, the cultivation rights of not just an individual family but also many families related to the headman lineage came to an end. Thus the Binjhals, who traced their descent from old headman lineages, and harboured nostalgia about their pasts of kingship, were often also the poorest people in villages dominated by other social groups. Frequent fighting of lawsuits with the zamindar and within jama indebted Binjhal families to village sahkars. The following accounts from neighbouring villages of Mahulkonda substantiate this argument further.

I visited the old headman family of Kondapali (pseudonym), on an early summer afternoon when the seedpods of the silk cotton trees had begun to burst, filling the air with the fluffy white fibre. Men and women were returning home with baskets full of red and purple char berries from their day's work in the forests that formed the natural boundary between Mahulkonda and Kondapali. The old headman family lived in a tiny mud-tile house with an ornately carved wooden door outside which some tethered goats munched lazily. The new headman family like in Mahulkonda were Kulthas. While approaching the village, our guide, a Binjhal well digger, had pointed out the bright yellow sunflowers and thick stands of sugarcane in the nua gountia's (new headman) family-owned fenced fields that had once been the Kondapali

bhogra. Summer cultivation in fenced fields is the surest sign of wealth and power in Borasambar, affordable only by the richest farmers. The afternoon stillness was broken by the chug-chug of the diesel pump set that farm workers were using to irrigate the sugarcane.

Gobardhan Bag, the elderly Binjhal man, from the old headman family of Kondapali, had a familiar story. He had speculated that like all Binjhals, his Aja (grandfather) had perhaps been too fond of Mahul and spent the malguzari money collected from the praja (subjects) without giving the zamindar his due. And then one day, the Borasambar zamindar had removed his family from the position of gountia. Then the zamindar had come to their village on his elephant and made offerings to the bhogra, spelling the end of the Binjhal gountiahi. Like Mahulkonda the zamindar had instituted a new jhankar (Binjhal priest) in the village, declared Kondapali his khamar. According to Gobardhan, their ancestors had resisted the takeover of their fields in the bhogra in standard fashion of the times. They would take their sword and other weapons and bury it on the bhogra land. They would prevent the zamindar's farm workers to sow seeds or work the plough on the bhogra. The zamindar in turn would retaliate by raiding their houses and use his police powers to initiate criminal proceedings against their family. After a zamindari raid nothing of value remained in the house, household equipment, grain stores, weapons, and livestock everything would be taken away.

After the zamindar's death, his widow had inherited Kondapali but had been afraid to set foot or eat in the village for fear of being poisoned. She had initiated a compromise and truce with their family by offering them 50 acres of land. The land that was offered and which Gobardhan ancestors had accepted out of hunger and need was not in the bhogra but an area of wasteland with scrub forest on the margins of the village. A few years later the widow had sold off the bhogra to a Kultha family who became the new headman of the village. While they, the descendants of the old headman family, Gobardhan had said, waving his arm, all those who live between the 'electric pole to the tube well' were without exception dirt-poor. According to Gobardhan, his elders had received a decree from the high court

in Cuttack that had partly acknowledged the rights of *hissadars* over the *bhogra* land, but the decree was never implemented. It had occurred to me that perhaps it was the legal order and not the fear of poisoning that had persuaded the zamindar's family to settle the dispute without giving up the valuable *bhogra* fields.

There was a similar story in Loharmal (pseudonym), a forested village at some distance from Mahulkonda. The Loharmal Binjhals had obtained the headman-ship of their hilly village in the nineteenth century as a reward for assisting the state to quell a local rebellion. The ancestors of the gountia jama were good marksmen and some of them had served as 'laskhars' or troops. But later, when the great famine had occurred, the headman family had got into trouble for sheltering bandits. The bandits had used the house of the headman to store looted goods like grain, gold, cattle, and then one day someone had informed on him. The zamindar had called him and given an ultimatum saying that he had the option of giving up his village or go to prison. Subsequently the zamindar had initiated a rent suit against the headman family for the non-payment of *malguzari* money and eventually taken the village away and made it into his *khamar*. Drummers and village criers had roamed the village announcing the end of the *gountiahi*. Later a branch of the zamindar's family had come to stay in Loharmal and started farming the *Bhogra*. The old headman family had reached the verge of fleeing from the village when the *praja* had asked them to stay. It was suggested that they should cut up some of the *gouchar* (pasture) and *patra* (scrub forest) and make land. Their family had taken that suggestion and live on like other *sukhbasi* or landless people in the village. Loharmal was a village that had poorer land than Mahulkonda or Kondapali, which was probably why it was never sold. In the present generation, many men from the old headman family have left the village to work as farm servants and some who had stayed back barely eked a living making and peddling charcoal from the forest. While my informant Daya Bag had preserved a copy of the rent suit notice that the zamindar had sent to his grandfather, he had been unaware of the actual nature of judicial verdict reached by the civil court.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The civil (ejectment) suit filed by the zamindar Borasambar against the Bag thekadars (Binjhal gountia) of this village is dated 1924/In the Court of Munsiff Bargarh: Title Suit no.72 of 1924.

In a village called Mohda, not too far away from Loharmal, the Binjhal lambardar gountia's childless widow, Amarti Barihen was given lifelong support by the zamindar when she had resigned the headman-ship position. At that time, half the village population had been of the same jama as the Binjhal gountia and related to each other. These were 'hissadar' families and had been affected by the loss of cultivation rights over the Bhogra (236 acres). The hissadar families had refused to leave the land and had sowed Paddy on the Bhogra to express their claims, leading to a number of coercive measures being taken against them. Some members of the jama had forcibly occupied (jabar-dakhal) several fields of the Bhogra and cultivated them during their lifetime. But during the third land settlement, their names were expunged from the village record of rights. Disputes had also broken out within the agnates when the zamindar allowed a particular family who had acted as jhankars or priests to retain their share of the bhogra. Another family had bought back 10 acres from the zamindar's family, only to discover that they had been registered as sharecroppers and not praja or ryots. Most of the present descendants were landless except for the fields that they had made from the forests that surrounded the village and subsisted on various precarious and illegal livelihoods such as tree felling, liquor making and peddling charcoal. In recent years they had to engage in renewed litigation with the zamindar's family when the fields that they were cultivating were declared as 'ceiling surplus land'. Eventually the zamindar family had sold the best fields to Teli cultivators who had become the biggest praja in the village.

When old headman lineages suffered fragmentation and dispersal, their descendants became the poorest people in the village society. Village narratives that describe this process through idioms of weapons and warfare, and kinship with kings attribute a great deal of agency to the Borasambar zamindar. But in the late nineteenth century broader changes in land tenure and the creation of privileged tenure around the office of village headman-ship and the redefined powers and privileges of zamindars were created by administrative decisions that were taken by British colonial administrators of Sambalpur district. These policies shaped the course of local disputes as well as the manner in which legitimacy of claims were asserted. The changes in land policies were aimed at enabling the further dismantling of the base of pre-colonial political authority and reducing the influence

of the agnatic lineage or clan base of the zamindar, and paving the way for new social groups to stake, secure and consolidate claims over land. To this end, the position of the gountia or the village headman in the Sambalpur zamindari areas became the subject of some debate among the concerned British administrators and redefined in specific ways through legislation during the late nineteenth century.

4.4 Village Headman-ship in Colonial Discourses and Policies

In the Central Provinces, the dual objective of converting the vast wastelands and forests into farmed areas and the identification of local groups suitable for implementing such a program informed colonial administrative decision-making about local institutions.⁶⁰ In the Chattisgarh division that included Sambalpur district till 1905, gountias or village headmen were selected to play a pivotal role in these policies. But the social groups who occupied these positions in the zamindari areas of Sambalpur evoked great consternation among the administrators. The official debates about the powers and rights of the village headman, took place in the shadow of the broad understanding that the majority of Borasambar zamindari inhabitants were Binjhals, who were 'aboriginal tribes.' Such people were considered incompatible with stable and peaceful climate of rule as well as the administrative imperative of expanding cultivation and generating revenue in the zamindari.

The British Central Provinces had included vast and widely different districts such as Sagar, Narmada, Nagpur, Chattisgarh and Sambalpur. Commenting on the uniqueness of land tenures in this region, in the administrative reports written in the 1860s, Richard Temple, the Chief Commissioner of the province had mentioned how in that region, land ownership had rested primarily with the State. Villages and estates were managed on behalf of the state by leaseholders holding revenue-collecting leases for a fixed term of years. These 'lease-holders' were responsible for raising the revenue demands made by the state administration. The principal leaseholder was described as the direct tenant of the state, while village people occupying the land were the sub-tenants of the village leaseholder (Temple

⁶⁰ Sivaramakrishnan (1995) describes similar processes at play in the Santhal parganas in eastern India, which led to particular kinds of classification of local groups and delineation of administrative territories and different policies for similarly situated groups leading to a situation of tribal marginality and pockets of poverty.

1862:67).⁶¹ Temple had attributed this form of 'peculiar' village governance to Maratha revenue policies and which had existed before the establishment of British administration in the region. While generalizing about this vast area, he mentioned the difference that had been observed in the easternmost district in Sambalpur. According to Temple, while the village headmen, who were known, as "Gowteas" in Sambalpur were also revenue-farmers, their position was hereditary and their tenants had undisputed rights of occupancy (ibid: 68). He had further drawn distinction between the 'State areas' or khalsa and the zamindaris. The zamindari estates 'near the turbulent frontier in the north, or in the forest regions of the east and south' were described as the only form of private property. The zamindars though were described less positively as 'rude chiefs of old decent' (ibid: 70). Richard Temple (1862) had proclaimed that the British administration would introduce in this context of temporary rights and exploitative, unreasonable revenue demands, the unique notion of private property that would protect both landed interests and titles. The professed aim was to confirm all farmers and leaseholders as 'proprietors and landlords' (Temple 1862:70).

This early championing of private ownership suffered a reversal in case of Sambalpur district in the wake of the prolonged zamindari rebellion (1849-1870). The policies that came into effect in the district were specially modified and differed from what was implemented in the rest of the Central Provinces. In the Central Provinces, the Gountias or village headmen were conferred hereditary rights over village land and powers that were similar to the permanently settled zamindars of Bengal. But such a policy was considered unsuitable for the zamindaris of Sambalpur. The active role that the indebted and disgruntled zamindars and their loyal followers had played in the rebellion modified the official policy with respect to Sambalpur. Rights of headman in this district were defined more as temporary right holders and subject to contractual agreements with the district administration that would be subject to periodic revisions. Different policies were also adopted for the khalsa as against the zamindari areas of Sambalpur.⁶²

⁶¹ EurMss/F86: Sir Richard Temples' Papers

⁶² *'Still this grant of proprietary right though in a modified form differentiated their position from that of the gountias in the zamindari villages and while the term gountia continued to be applied to the former, the term thekadar gradually came into use to denote the latter. (D-O No.166. In Policy to be followed in dealing with*

The khalsa, or area under direct British Administrative control consisted of two administrative divisions: Sambalpur tehsil (743 sq. miles) and Bargarh tehsil (827 sq. miles). There were 16 zamindaris spread over 1791 sq.miles with Borasambar (841 sq. miles) being the largest amongst these (O'Malley 1909:164). In the zamindaris it was decided that the village headmen should be treated as a thekadar or temporary leaseholder of revenue villages who would have only official rights over the bhogra or sir land; rights that were bound to and defined as the remuneration for holding the temporary office of headmanship. While the gountias of khalsa area were later given ownership of the bhogra land, the gountias in the zamindari areas came to be known as *thekadar* in official parlance (though not in villages) and were treated like temporary state officials.

There were contradictory currents of thought among colonial administrators about the nature of village headman. Some believed that these were hereditary representative of traditional, unchanging village communities that had survived the vicissitudes of dynastic changes, while others, viewed them as exploitative intermediaries imposed by state authorities. Early administrators of Central India such as John Malcolm had espoused the hereditary nature of village headmen describing the 'potails' as associated with founding families whose rights and claims persisted despite 'frequent and violent change of rule in the country' (1824:14-15). In a similar fashion, William Hunter had regarded the village headmen of mainland Orissa, as hereditary in nature, stressing upon the strong popular opinion and 'deep-rooted impression' that they were the lineal descendants of the original founder of the villages (1872:250).⁶³ In the Central Provinces, Richard Temple's argument had been that the eighteenth century Maratha administration had levelled the society by removing all traditional intermediaries between the peasants and the raja and had farmed out large portions of the areas under their control to tax-farmers. This theory is summarized in Baden-Powell's thesis on British land system as follows:

proposals for the cancellation of the protected status of thekaders in zamindari villages in the district of Sambalpur under section 65A of the Central Provinces Land Revenue Act, 1881)

⁶³ De Souza (2002) however argues that hereditary headmen of mainland Orissa were creations of the colonial regime that created landlords out of temporary office holders through the policy of permanent settlement similar to Bengal.

'The Raja regarded the village headmen (gaontiyas) as 'thekadars', or mere lessees for revenue purposes. Here the system was a periodical lease, at a fixed amount, which was however indirectly raised by the levy of a fine or nazrana, at each renewal. The increase was partly recovered from the raiyats, by raising their rent or payment but was mostly paid by the headman, whose sir (locally called 'bhogra') holding was left out of count in distributing the ordinary revenue assessments over the village lands' (Baden-Powell 1974:379)⁶⁴.

The concept of *nazar* was an important rhetorical device to argue about the longstanding nature of essentially temporary nature of village headman-ship as well as to underscore British administrative improvement of the existing situation. While *nazar* was a variable tribute that the village headmen made to the Raja or zamindar, it was interpreted as a periodic tax or rent that was paid in order to continue holding the village headman position. There is no evidence however that the *nazar* was enforceable or that it was or could be enforced or that non-payment led to the loss of revenue collecting or cultivation rights by village gountia. Interpreting the *nazar* as unreasonable rent enabled the colonial administration to argue that they were bringing in a more benevolent rule than predecessor regimes by making rights in land secure and taxation stable. The new revenue administration based on regular assessment and a single annual payment was higher than the low tax regimes of the past but described as replacing oppressive customary demands such as *nazar* and other contributions including that of military supplies made by past regimes (Dewar 1906:50, Ouseley 1847).

For the zamindaris, the colonial administration drew up village lease contracts or *wajib-ul-urz*, which clearly stated the rights and duties of the headman who were described as the *thekadar* or *thikanedars*. The gountiahi or thekadar tenures as they came to be known were deemed heritable and non-transferable and subject to

⁶⁴ Baden-Powell also writes that: *'There can hardly be any doubt that the gaontiyas office was hereditary; indeed, the whole custom of Hindu states would have been averse to anything else in the case of men who so often were founders or improvers of their villages. The raja entrusted him with the lease or revenue management of the village, and held him responsible for the village total. The period was fixed at five years or other short term, not as indicating any limit to the gaontiyas customary tenure, but merely giving the Raja an opportunity of replenishing his treasury by demanding an increase in time to time in the shape of a 'nazrana', or renewal fee: this however was not always exacted.'* (1974: 471)

standard annual revenue payment determined by the revenue officer (Dewar 1906:49). The village sir or bhogra, usually land that was directly cultivated and occupied by the headman families was interpreted as a salary substitute for the headman who was akin to an official appointed by the zamindari administration to work as revenue collector. The state retained the power to recall an official for non-performance of duties, just as the official had the power to serve his or her resignation (*istafa*) citing incapacity. Several rules were made applicable to the Sir to prevent its disintegration such as it could not be legally partitioned among co-sharers or descendants or bought or sold. It was held that the Sir could only be transferred when village thekadar or revenue collecting leases were auctioned. Rights in the sir were linked only to office and would go to the new headman who took up the position.

While the *malguzars* of the Central Provinces were made owners of their villages or sir, the Sambalpur *gountias* and village headmen, irrespective of whether they were clansmen of the zamindar or traders and moneylenders came to be defined as temporary and contractual leaseholders. What prompted the above policies were to a great extent the debates around the identities and characters of the zamindars and the village *gountias* of Sambalpur zamindaris. The zamindaris of Sambalpur were ruled and predominantly inhabited by the following groups: Gonds (12) and Binjhals (2), kin of the former raja of Sambalpur (3) and Individuals (3) who had obtained these territories as grants from the administration for their loyalty to the British cause during the rebellion (Fuller 1891:15). The Gond and the Binjhals were viewed as 'aboriginal' and considered unsuitable leaders (or subjects) of peaceful peasant communities. Many had played a prominent role in the mid nineteenth century rebellion. But most were nevertheless reinstated after the rebellion under new contracts and tribute agreements.⁶⁵ Village *gountias* were usually from the *jati* of the zamindars and predominantly 'aboriginal' *jati* groups in the zamindari areas. It was a clear administrative decision to obtain a truce with the powerful 'aboriginal element' while allowing revenue policies, land markets, competition over village offices and land free play to balance out the social field. To this end it was decided that only

⁶⁵ After 1857, only two estates were confiscated and their zamindars identified as principal leaders in the rebellion were given capital punishment. One of these was the zamindar of Ghes, a small zamindari adjoining Borasambar, whose ruler had been an agnatic relative of the Borasambar zamindar.

temporary leases would be given to village headmen and the extension of these village contracts would be conditional on timely revenue payment and demonstration of 'improvement' in cultivation.

In sparsely populated forest covered zamindari like Borasambar, 238 new villages were established and there ensued a brisk trade in village revenue-collecting (malguzari) leases. In 1833, there were 271 villages in the Borasambar zamindari.⁶⁶ At the time of the first land settlement, in 1885, the number of villages had increased to 383 (Fuller 1891). By 1906, during the time of the second land Settlement there were 434 villages. During the same time cultivated area had expanded to 218122.18 acres (Dewar 1906). By 1926, 42 new villages were established by converting forest from the zamindari forestland (classified as private forest) and the occupied area increased by 78,267 acres (Hamid 1927). Immigrant social groups obtained headmen positions through such purchases and often settled their own caste members as praja. Land classified as ryoti or prajati was also purchased by migrant social groups who had been driven from the khalsa areas, throughout this period, into the forest by the higher revenue demands and prolonged rebellion in that area. Out of this emigrant group emerged the new headman, zamindari officials and a willing tenant body consisting of diverse social groups who could better fulfil the exacting revenue and agrarian demands, eventually outnumbering, displacing and buying out the older rights of existent population and villages. Over a period of time zamindari villages in the fertile eastern parts came to resemble the multi caste villages of Sambalpur khalsa areas, while the western, more impoverished part retained clearer links with the old zamindari society. In the latter revenue demands and land demarcation and valuation had been less stringent and villages remained under the rule of Binjhal headmen and their tenants who were also their kin and relations. (Mahulkonda and other villages discussed in this thesis, being located in and around the valley of the Ong River come broadly under the category of eastern villages).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ List of Estates and Zemindaries under the superintendence of the Agent of the SW frontier: Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 1st October 1832, No.107. From the Officiating Political Agent of the Southwest Frontier

⁶⁷ Distribution of village headman-ship in Sambalpur district, by caste in 1901: Gond (886), Binjhar (487), Rajput (472), Brahman (429), Kolta (346), Others (327). (Russell 1905:10)

Despite this curious interpretation of headmanship in the Sambalpur zamindaris that led to the curtailment of the rights of the headmen on sir land, certain measures were created for the protection of old village headmen. The displacement of old headmen by new bidders of village leases or 'money lenders' in the early days was found alarming, considered to create insecurity for cultivators and therefore detrimental to the development of the village (Dewar 1906: 49). In 1882, an enquiry undertaken in Borasambar zamindari by H. Priest, the then Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur led to the conferring of 'protection' on old gountias or village headmen, if they could prove long occupation and improvements made in the village. Legislation to this effect was enacted in 1888. It was feared that the old gountias, who were identified as 'aboriginal headmen' in the hill zamindaris would otherwise be displaced by waves of moneylenders and speculators who had entered the region following British peace and which in turn would give rise to undesirable local unrest.⁶⁸

This protective policy kept many Binjhal gountias in their positions and in their villages till the beginning of twentieth century. Mahulkonda was one of the villages where the old Binjhal gountias were given 'protected status' following Priest's investigation. During the survey the Binjhal gountias had declared their contribution toward village improvement as settling 6 praja families, digging an irrigation tank and planting fruit trees. Based on this declaration and the fact that the headman-ship had been with the Binjhal family for four generations, the rights of the 'shikmi gountia' enjoyed by a Kallar family to whom the Binjhal gountia family had sub-contracted the village had been considered invalid.⁶⁹

The policy of protecting old gountias had effectively lasted only twenty years. After the conclusion of the first detailed land settlement in Borasambar zamindari, the

⁶⁸ Such decisions have been described by historians as the notoriously ambiguous attitude of the colonial state towards capitalist transformation of agriculture and which had more to do with the condition of 'land plenty and labour scarcity' than any real fear of local unrest (Washbrook 1981).

⁶⁹ Ac No. 138/S Borasambar Enquiry Proceedings by Mr. Priest, Settlement Officer, Sambalpur. 11.12.1888 to 17.5.1889 / p.130-131 of the compilation

settlement officer had suggested a reconsideration of protection grants, declaring these as an unnecessary intrusion into zamindar-thekadar relations.⁷⁰ According to this report, a 'very serious consequence' of the 'protection' legislation was that the 'aboriginal' headmen who constituted a majority of the protected-thekadars, 'freed from the stimulating dread of being ousted had fallen into careless ways and debt'. At the same time the 'encroaching Hindu bidders' were making deals with 'aboriginal' headmen that gave rise to multiple leaseholders between the village and the zamindar, which created complications for obtaining revenue (Dewar 1906). Colonial administrators expressed the preferences exhibited towards one kind of headmen over another in the language of aborigine versus superior caste. Dewar had suggested that for the cause of village development, the best measure would be the cancellation or renewal of the protection status of village leaseholders at each settlement after assessing the individual case (1906:49). The *wajib-ul-urz* that were drawn up following Dewar's land settlement (1904-1924) also mentioned that the rights of co-sharer on the village *Sir* ceased to exist if the *lambardar* lost the thekadari of the village.

These policies were put into effect in the early 20th century, when Borasambar zamindari had also emerged from fifteen years of rule by the Court of Ward. The new zamindar, Rajendra Singh had resumed rule in 1899. The selected heir to the Binjhal ruling family of Borasambar was educated and trained in the prince's college in Raipur by the Court of Ward's administration. It was during his tenure as a zamindar, that protection status of many old Binjhal gountias had been cancelled, resignations of headman-ship had been accepted and village leases auctioned to new headmen families. These processes took place mainly in the eastern part of the zamindari, excluding parts of the Amri clan area in the western part, considered hilly and unproductive. The new zamindar had sold many village leases to cultivator *jatis* who were highly favoured as both headmen and tenants and also donated agricultural land and granted official positions to Brahmins. Supported by the district administration, these decisions helped to consolidate his status as an autonomous ruler free from kin control as well as a Hindu Kshatriya king following the prevalent

⁷⁰ In Policy to be followed in dealing with proposals for the cancellation of the protected status of thikadars in zamindari villages in the district of Sambalpur under section 65A of the Central Provinces Land Revenue Act, 1881

model in the reconstituted kingdoms in the neighbourhood. Rajendra Singh zamindar wrote numerous applications to the Sambalpur Board of revenue for the cancellation of the protected status of old gountias or thekaders.⁷¹ Many village leases were resold to new leaseholders that became gountia. Many villages like Mahulkonda became converted as the raja's khamar. During this time the zamindar introduced Brahman officials (muqdam and muhuri) to manage and supervise the village, thus taking away all effective power from the juna gountia family.

The old Binjhal headmen as the earlier sections indicate were the biggest sufferers in these turn of the century settlement as they lost their gountiahi and along with it their Sir land, which was in most cases the only land that they had in their ancestral villages. While the gountia's office was vested in one person selected from the village headman lineage, the Sir was shared and cultivated by other members of the different segments of the gountia's lineage. These were officially termed as co-sharers or hissadars and their names appeared in the village record of rights. Loss of village gountiahi affected more people besides the person who directly held the office of thikedar/gountia. The raja it is often said in the village today only recognized the lambardar, or the person holding the number. Bernard Cohn (2001[1969]: 399) mentions how the use of the term lambardar (from English number in the jama-bandi or rent roll), in the settlement of 1789-90 in the North-western Provinces: 'tended to elevate a person who was at best primus inter pares above his co-sharers'.⁷² The Sambalpur policy recognized the lambardar-gountia only as the state appointed revenue collectors who were paid in tax-free land in lieu of services rendered by them. It did not recognize the fact that the lambardars were also representatives and elected heads of land controlling lineages of previously dominant groups. What this policy completely failed to address was the joint cultivation and sharing of rights to produce of village-lands by agnatic males of local social groups in the zamindaris whose right of occupation was not derived solely from their new tax-collecting duties, but also from kinship and in the past military service. Many gountias lineages not

⁷¹ In one of the letters written in 1903, to the Board of Revenue, Rajendra Singh zamindar cites the poverty of the gountia as the reason for his inability to manage his village. (Ac no. 139/S. Sambalpur: Board of Revenue and Judicial Papers. (1889-1905). Protected Status to Gountias in zamindaris)

⁷² Cohn (2001[1969]:399) mentions how the office had eventually become transferable such that it could be at times be held by diverse entitles such as a child, an auction purchaser or a widow.

only claimed to be 'khunt katas,' or forest clearers, who had settled villages, invited other settlers, dug tanks and planted groves (Baden-Powell 1974:471) but among groups such as Binjhals and Kondhs also asserted their ownership of the 'soil' (Cobden-Ramsay 1910, Bailey 1960). Redefined headman-ship became a potential cause of feuds within agnatic lineages and between headman lineages and the Borasambar zamindar who was viewed as usurping the rights of kin groups to the sir land through sale of village revenue collecting lease on various pretexts, especially the non payment of malguzari rent.

The logic of the lambardari and thekadari was extended to the few other service tenures and these were also made contractual and temporary. The pressure on the sir as well as service-tenures was increased because these were the only tax-free land. By the time the land settlement processes were fully established in Sambalpur, the colonial state did not wish to create privileged tenures unless it also served the purposes of administration. Among the service grants created were the positions of the village nariha or water carrier, the jhankar or Binjhal priests and chaukidari or village police. All these positions came with a fixed proportion of rent-free land that was ideally supposed to be a part of the village sir. The position of the jhankar also underwent curious redefinitions and resulted in similar disentitlement of co-sharers. While the jhankar was viewed as necessary due to traditional beliefs related to the worship of the earth, to make the grant of revenue free land economically worthwhile, it was ruled that the jhankar would also have to serve as a police assistant at the village level along with the chaukidar. The new position of jhankar was less about priestly duties and more about paying regular visits to the (thana) police station and keeping track of births, deaths and violent or unlawful activities in the village.

The Sambalpur administration was greatly concerned about protecting the rights of the tenants from the undue exactions of gountias and zamindars and this led to the legal stipulation of several customary demands from the prajas such as beth-begari (free labour), bheti (gifts in kind) and nazar (tributes/presents). These conditions were also laid out in the village and zaminadari 'papers' or contracts. According to Rothermund (1978), the administrative prejudice against money lenders had led to the Central Provinces getting the best protective legislation for ryots and it seems

that the large self-cultivating occupancy tenants in general were more successful than gountias in keeping their land. While disputes among co-sharers of ryoti land were very common in Mahulkonda these were of a different nature and the lambardars among the ryots did not have the power to sell or transfer the lineage share. The Binjhal tenants or ryots, although these were fewer in number in eastern villages had been better able to keep their land in Borasambar villages.

5.5 Conclusion

Throughout the fertile villages of Borasambar, in the early twentieth century the Binjhals had systematically lost village headman-ship (gountiahi) positions. Nearly a century later, for the impoverished Binjhals cultivators and farm workers, gountiahi has retained its relevance precisely because they had lacked other means of obtaining legal rights to the land. When they enacted the past and remembered it in their land claims, their objective was less to restore the distant glorious past of diffuse land control but the nearer better remembered past, aided by colonial land records and rent-suit notices, that contained evidence of the times when as headman, they had privileged rights over a large area of village land. The idioms they use and the memories they recount, elicit and generate discussions that go beyond legal rights to cultivable land to the discourses and debates around the policies that bestowed specific powers and entitlements to village headmen in the late nineteenth century. This was also when the newly established colonial state was searching for a suitable framework to guide the agrarian and social transformation of the forest areas of western Orissa to replace the dissident political practises of the previous decades (discussed in chapter 2).

What this chapter shows is how multiple processes emerged from administrative policies around land tenures in the late nineteenth century and identification of people would manage such a process. The innovation of British administration in Borasambar was the legislative changes that re-defined the traditional institution of headmanship or gountiahi that were previously about a variety of things: political authority, land control, revenue collection, military tribute and clan-ship, into marketable offices of revenue collection and village management resting on

individual office-holders, the 'lambardar' or the person with the number who among all other members of the lineage was listed in the rent roll. Such legislation made headmanship into temporary offices subject to fulfilment of official duties and simultaneously also made specific rights of the headman permanent and legally empowered by the administration.

Removed from clan control, headmanship became a lucrative and tradable commodity. A variety of relatively moneyed groups (traders, distillers, farmers from valley areas) purchased these positions to become the new headmen of Borasambar villages. This change was far more apparent in the fertile, eastern villages though the western villages where Binjhals continued as headman were not unaffected. Binjhals even in the 1870s could retain headmanship despite being indebted to moneylenders, by sharing or partitioning revenue collecting rights or using force to re-establish their claims, if necessary. Under the new dispensation, such autonomous decision-making was not possible since gountia's rights were fixed by the state. Revenue farming may not have been a new concept in the region, what was novel though was the extinction of the diffuse patterns of land control that gave rights to allocate land, claim shares of produce and obtain cultivation rights by the members of longstanding clan-groups.

Who gained and who lost in this process and what forms of land accumulation and social differentiation took place in the wake of the above reorganization? Binjhal headman clans were older and larger. When their lambardars lost the position of headmanship, many families lost cultivation rights over fertile fields. Later such families would be poorer than the praja. Families that purchased these positions could accumulate and consolidate by expanding in the next generation, into more interior forest areas, and purchasing more gountia positions. In this way, land was lost by old headman families and accumulated by new headman families. There was a caste aspect to this process as land control slipped away from the Binjhals in a large part of the zamindari to become the relatively secure rights of other social groups, both praja and gountia.

If the size of landholding were the only important determinant of class status, then all headmen families would be rich. But in Borasambar villages, villages had wildly

variable land types. The Binjhal gountias of hill villages were not as prosperous as the non-Binjhal gountias of well-cultivated valley areas. People who controlled the best fields, whether in the hills or the valleys were the richer whether they were gountias or not. Differences between Binjhal praja and non-Binjhal gountia would be sometimes starker in forest villages with poor land and many small landholders. In better-cultivated villages, there was a great deal more competition between praja and gountia and within the praja community. In the agrarian expansion that took place during this period, benefits were differentially distributed among social groups. For the gountia and praja families with secure land rights it created wealth to obtain more land, for the Binjhals who lost their rights to cultivate through loss of village offices, there was only labouring opportunities. All farmers though with different endowments and outcomes struggled to raise crops in the rain-fed forest area that was not amenable to intensive cultivation.

Chapter 5: Cultivating Forest fields: ‘In the Past we could not Farm’

In the previous chapter I showed how permanent rights in land were created through the reorganization of traditional institutions and political authorities in forested Borasambar. The present chapter focuses on the memories and practises of farming, the differential gains made by people through cultivation of specific crops and the symbolic value of agriculture among impoverished social groups who have long attributed their suffering to their inability to farm. The question that is asked here is not what happens to small-scale producers under capitalist transformation of agriculture but how such multi-variant processes enable specific patterns of social inequalities and the construction of social categories and economic differentiation among farming people to emerge.

Agricultural productivity has been central to the idea of India's future, underpinning its development and modernization project as well as the image of its past consisting of self-sufficient village communities (Ludden 1992). But in Orissa, away from the deltaic plains of the Mahanadi, ecological factors often impeded the possibilities of intensive cultivation of staple food grains such as rice or wheat. Here the land was either too undulate or steep, soil too sandy, thin or deficient, the rainfall erratic, numerous hill streams impermanent and unruly, large areas under cover of dense forests. And yet, forest covered places like Borasambar were not unaffected by what the historian David Arnold (1988:112) has described as the, ‘vast and speculative grain trade that had developed in India through the construction of railways, the advent of steam ships and the permissive government policy of *laissez-faire*.’ Here, based on secure property rights, boundaries between farms and forests emerged and forest dwellers struggled to become farmers through the better part of the twentieth century. Recent historical scholarship has argued that under colonial rule, agriculture expanded into the marginal territories and nomads, pastoralists and tribesmen were forced to settle down leading to the consolidation of the peasantry (Bayly 1988). Such expansion led to agrarian crisis when ecologically and topographically adjusted cultivation methods were discarded leading to the ‘pauperization of the peasantry’ and the flight of forest dwelling communities who

were dependent both on cultivation and forests (Das Gupta 2009:227). Tribal areas were less susceptible to famines due to their ecologically adjusted livelihoods of adivasi people in which settled cultivation, pastoralism and foraging played complementary roles (ibid). Increased dependence on a single rice crop cultivated on inferior, rain dependent uplands and cleared forests such as for example in South Eastern Chotanagpur, made village agrarian economy fragile and people vulnerable to repeated famines. Thus the greatly expanded and intensified agriculture based on rice cultivation on upland soils was unsustainable in the absence of adequate sources of irrigation (Das Gupta 2009). Increase of cultivation and restriction of forests under colonial rule had an adverse effect on the adivasi people of Singbhum making them dependent on rain-fed rice and therefore prone to famine and scarcity. When such crisis occurred colonial authorities blamed the adivasi for being improvident, lazy and impervious to change (ibid). In Mahulkonda, people apply similar distinctions to local groups measuring their capacities to farm and using that as a basis to justify the unequal distribution of rice fields and prevalence of indigence. Yet unlike historical accounts in which agrarian transformations and adverse social effects appear to be total and irreversible, in village accounts, the changes and shifts in styles of cultivation appear to be much more gradual and its benefits are greatly highlighted due to the symbolic value attached to farms and higher yielding crops over forest dwelling.

Cultivation is 'structured by cultural assumptions, in which ideas of identity and personhood are embodied and made manifest' (Spencer 1990: 97). Growing food is both a performance as well as the mark of identity since through this work people produced not only the material world but also honour (Gudeman 1986). In much of Asia, growing specific crops such as rice has symbolised culture and sophistication, social standing in the appropriate ritual order, and used as a metaphor to distinguish and create boundaries between external and internal others without rice paddies (Spencer 1990, Ohnuki-Tierney 1995:10, Leach 1964). Crop production and implications of following particular pathways of making a living therefore underpin social experiences of wealth and indigence connecting these with valued identities and extant, unquestioned hierarchies. In places such as inland Orissa where ecological, technological and capital constraints restricted the extent of rice cultivation (Bailey 1957, 1960, Currie 2000:92), rice was the most valued crop

associated with status, commercial profits and food security. In Borasambar, rice fields were scarce as reclaiming land from forest was expensive and cultivation on upland fields prone to risks. Yet the cultivation of rice has in the recent past enabled families to gain from the rising prices of commodities in the market and control asymmetric and commercial transactions based on paddy. Paddy stores enabled farmers to command labour and build local following through consumption loans. The headman's fields were often the most visible expanse of paddy cultivation in the village. Poor villagers in contrast were those who were neither able to cultivate paddy nor find escape in the forest. Their difficulties stemmed from their lack of adequate and appropriately located fields and the gradual encroachment of farms into forests. Ironically it was the indigence and must criticized forest-dependence of impoverished groups that partly stabilized the paddy-based prosperity of the local farmer-landlords, called sahuikars.

5.1 Agricultural Cycle in Mahulkonda

It thunders, it rumbles/ but does not rain,
This year it rained much / no rashi, no moong
Rashi and moong / fell away,
Late sown dhan / feast for the pests
Rain this time/like the darkest night
Heart leaps and trembles with love/
Come dalkhai friends

Given above is a woman's song from Mahulkonda that uses the metaphor of crops and rain, to talk about courtship and love. Dalkhai is part of women's ritual of dancing and courtship that is celebrated in autumn (October), just after the harvest of upland crops (see chapter 8). Possibly connected to the harvesting of legumes, crops that are taken care of by women, dalkhai literally translated could mean 'eating dal' (pulses or legumes). Here, the trembling of the singer's heart awaiting her lover is likened to the wait for the coming of rains, with eagerness and trepidation. Excessive rain could destroy the ripe rashi (sesame) and moong (green gram). It could cause

banki, (pests) to eat the soft, still growing kernels of rice. Dark nights brought by the rains suggests the terrible times to come if the precious crops were truly lost. The darkness of the night also hints at an opportunity for the lovers to meet undetected. Agriculture occupies the heart of the village society in Borasambar. But what it offers is a precarious and fragile foundation for subsistence that frequently disappoints the promises of food security.

In Borasambar villages people grow a diverse mix of dry crops on the rolling up and down land and cultivate rice in the precious valley bottom fields, edged by forest trees. Preparation of fields begins in late summer, when bullock drawn ploughs are used to break up the hardened clods of earth. Some farmers undertake the custom of khardi sowing that involved broadcast sowing of paddy seeds in the hard sun baked soil. Others wait for the rains to come and the land to be muddied before sowing (batri) or even later, to sow (achra) in the puddled land after the first big showers. The sowing of paddy begins after the jatra (ritual) undertaken by the Binjhal priest, jhankar. It was customary for the jhankar's fields to be sown first.

The months of Ashad and Sraban (June-August) are the main rain months and constitute the onset of the principal agricultural season. By now the land is prepared and both upland crops and low land rice are sown. Most of the rice is sown bihura (broadcast) in Mahulkonda. Some amount of rice cultivation also takes place through rua or transplantation. The operations of ploughing, weeding and transplantation, sowing upland crops and preparing house gardens (bari), creates the busiest three months of the year when people are rarely to be found indoors. But often, they were also tired and hungry at these times, their food stores depleted, having lived on very little through the summer.

Thus when early autumn (September-October), comes and people start harvesting the upland crops, there is a sense of the year turning. Autumn harvest is celebrated with nuakhai, or eating the new crops from the upland. In the past the principal crop that was harvested and consumed during this period was kudo (millets). At present it is Rice. Nuakhai is the most important festival of western Orissa. The autumn harvest provides much needed respite to farmers through some cash earnings at a time when the harvesting of lowland paddy, is at least 2-3 months away.

Paddy harvest begins in earnest by the end of Dashera (October) and continues till end of Mokshir (November-December). By the month of Push (January), the entire rice crop is harvested, threshed and ready to be stored in 'pura' straw plaited baskets. In some villages, long thick rope-like braids made from paddy straw are visible everywhere at this time, suspended from trees and resting on tiled roofs, to be shaped later into baskets where paddy would be stored. During the threshing and winnowing of paddy, people camp out in their khola and in the fields where they make temporary straw shelters called kurma. The threshed paddy was sometimes parboiled in the field and dried in the sun before being taken to the mill for husking. While they processed the harvested paddy, they would also watch over the chickpea and jhunga crops. Later fields on the irrigated flank of the village were prepared for planting a second crop, usually groundnut if the water situation was satisfactory.

Signalling the end of the ek-khed, season of Borasambar, the first full moon day in the month of Push (January) is celebrated with feasting, drinking and licentious revelry. On that day permanent farm workers are paid (nistar) the remainder of their wages in sacks of paddy, released from their term of work and new contracts made for the forthcoming year. Most of the fields would be kept fallow till next Ashad. By custom, village cattle are allowed to graze freely on the straw-stubble covered fields for six months. Farmers, who sometimes cultivated chickpeas using the residual moisture in their bahal fields in January, had to mount constant surveillance to ensure that crops were not destroyed by rampaging herds of hungry cattle who cannot be prevented from roaming free during this time. Village cattle are collectively grazed on the empty fields after *Push Punni* and this served also to manure the fields. Often village graziers are requested to organize the cattle to be herded on specific fields. Talks about fencing the fields by barbed wire for raising summer crops invited strong criticism since this would prevent the cattle from gaining access to the straw and stubble of the harvested fields.

In spring the jhankar performed the ceremony, called mahul gudi, initiating the period of forest produce collection. The months of Chait, Baisakh and Jeth (February – May), were times for forest related work: pruning shrubs of kendu bushes, collecting kendu leaves, collecting char berries, mahul flowers and seeds of the mahul. The

collection of kendu leaves, used for the manufacture of the bidi (cigarette), is organized and initiated by the forest department. In every other big sized village, where a good harvest is expected, a phadi or a hut like temporary shelter is built for storing the leaves. Leaves are collected in the morning, sorted, tied into bundles in the afternoon and brought to the phadi, later in day on head loads or sling baskets. Outside the phadi, the bundles are laid out in rows, to be counted and paid for by the kendu phadi employees called 'checkers'. Once paid for, the leaves are stored in the phadi, till groups of itinerant workers, arrive. These people from elsewhere camp near the phadi for a few days till the leaves are packed into specific sized bundles. Kendu leaves are harvested mainly from the 'at' (high unembanked upland) and village people did not have to restrict their collection within self-owned fields. The collective spirit displayed towards Kendu leaves is not extended to the collection of mahul flowers and tol (seeds) or that matter for fruit such as char berries and mangos.

Mahul trees had once dotted the 'at' and 'mal' uplands, their growth carefully protected from the plough and had thickly populated the village and state forests girding the village. At present these trees were found mainly in groves that have survived on privately owned fields and to a lesser extent in the degraded forests surrounding the village. The leasing of mahul groves and (or specific trees) for collection rights, in spring and summer was as brisk as the leasing of bahal fields. For instance, in 2003, when the Dhoba (washerwoman) family's daughter got married, her mother rented out the collecting rights to the mahul trees on their fields to a Kultha family for three years in exchange for an advanced cash payment. As mahul trees were counted and inherited, bought and sold and rented and share cropped, access to gleanings from these trees get restricted.

Stricter control over trees and the diminishing forests have meant that impoverished women go in groups to scout distant mahul groves, to pick fruit and seed that is left over after the 'owners' or leaseholders had left with their early morning picking. Older people said that previously, cattle grazed on the flowers after people finished their day's collection. But the higher cash prices that could be obtained for mahul at present, coupled with the scarcity of trees has meant that guard was kept on the trees for a longer time. A Haldiya Teli farmer told me that in his youth they would

store and eat rather than sell mahul flowers, a 20 kg tin of which would fetch only a quarter of a rupee. But mahul flowers at present were viewed as a source of much needed source of cash income. Many poorer villagers, who have purchased forest fields with mahul trees using their wage labour incomes, have also benefited from the growing cash earnings from mahul.

No villager, however big a farmer, would forsake the earnings from the collection and sale of forest crops. The only difference was that in case of the rich farmers and village headman's household, farm servants closely supervised by older women of the family carried out the gleaning work. Mahul flowers are collected and dried in the sun for several days before being sold to the itinerant cyclist peddlers who come to the village. At this time the village common area is soaked in the fragrance and colour of drying, fermenting flowers. Women often kept one group of buyers waiting while they checked out the prices offered by others. Prices were especially high in 2003 because of a poor crop and this helped many households to bear the summer crisis, pay off their debts and buy new clothes for the children. In the long afternoons cyclist pedlars, arrived to bargain and banter with the women over price. Sometimes itinerant women traders from chator pot (barren villages) came to exchange their vegetables and puffed rice for dried mahul.

Apart from forest work, in summer, few people who could spare time and had access to wells also grew vegetables on agricultural fields or house gardens. Demand for summer vegetables in the local market has seen a spurt of this cultivation. In recent times the farm forest cycle has been modified and punctuated with wage labour work through seasonal migration and government welfare projects. These activities have drawn away labouring men from agricultural work in the village and resulted in minor increases in local wages. The well to do farmers in Mahulkonda frequently complained about the added difficulties of cultivation in a situation where they had to compete with state welfare projects and farmers in the irrigated belt, over wage labour. Wealth and wellbeing in Mahulkonda and neighbouring villages in the past was associated with the resources generated by the local farmers through their cultivation skills and ability to support others through the provision of work, credit and consumption loans. However the rice centric cropping pattern of the region was

always constrained by the scarcity of fertile fields, repeated drought and absence of irrigation.

5.2 The Ecological Constraints to Cultivation

When I arrived in Mahulkonda in August (the month of Sraban), 2002, village people were on the verge of holding the annual rainmaking rite, kado-jatra that ushered in the agricultural season. But the meagreness of rain in the months that followed meant that by the time of nuakhai, much of the rice seedlings were growing wild in their nurseries waiting to be transplanted. The rice stalks that had emerged from the seeds that had already been sown using the bihura (broadcast method) were drying. Mahulkonda was headed that year for a middle-sized crop drought. Crop damage through drought was so frequent an occurrence in the predominantly rain-fed cultivation of Borasambar that people tended to face the prospect with grim resignation. One of the factors often remarked upon by the villagers when they assessed their crop damage was the scarcity of fertile and good quality land.

Agricultural land in Mahulkonda, as in the entire Borasambar region has been reclaimed from the forest over the last hundred years and remains highly variable in quality. Locally fields are differentiated through their heights, slopes, soil quality and compatibility with specific crops. Field types were characterised by specific pattern of cropping and labour. High sloping uplands called 'at' were not embanked and displayed the most diverse stands of crops. In 2002, some farmers had planted a combination of the following crops: biri (black gram), moong (green gram), rahadi (pigeon pea), mungfali (groundnut) and rashi (sesame) over 0.5 -1acre 'at' fields. Village record of rights indicate the 'at' fields in early twentieth century were sometimes larger but displayed similar diversity, growing up to 15 different crops. For instance, a 5 acre field of a Haldiya Teli farmer had the following crops: rashi (sesame), dhan (paddy), rahadi (pigeon pea), chillies and kudo (millets) (Village record of rights, Dewar 1906).⁷³

⁷³ Bandobast No.285/ mouza: B., Tahsil: Bargarh, Jilla: Sambalpur. Settlement Department Sambalpur. (1902-1905). Dewar Settlement. July 1, 1906 – 30/6/1926.

The 'at' fields were cultivated with quick ripening crops that survived better under rain-fed conditions and provided some returns continuously. Some upland fields were converted into fenced garden lands called 'bari' or 'barchha', the former adjoining the house and latter away on the fields, and both were irrigated using shallow wells. These fields were mainly used for vegetable cultivation. In 1906, 51% of the total cultivated land in Mahulkonda village (780.95 acres), was sandy upland or 'at'.⁷⁴ The upland based cultivation had declined over time due to a combination of factors.

Upland fields had once been more easily available. This was the time when people said that land tended to be either khal or dhip that is either excessively deep or very high. Since valley-bottom land was often inundated, paddy crops would rot. Therefore, people preferred to clear the slopes and cultivate millets, oilseeds, dry paddy and other hardy varieties on their 'at' fields. These upland fields flowed seamlessly into the forests in the higher slopes and had required constant clearing of vegetation before sowing. Crops growing on the outlying fields, in the past, were often susceptible to raids by wild animals, foxes, bears and wild boars and deer. People mention how bears, foxes and wild pigs would decimate the sugarcane, groundnut and root crops. But forest detritus was considered key to the yield of upland crops. Even in 2002, the village families who had upland fields, skirting the border of the reserve forest, first undertook clearing of brush and scrub forests before sowing sesame. But upland fields in Mahulkonda had become scarce and were no longer connected to the forest. Moreover many such fields had been converted for the cultivation of rice. In the past, intensive cultivation of rice was restricted to the mal and bahal type of fields.

The sloping fields that were comparatively less high were called 'mal'. Low-lying valley bottom fields were called bahal or bahali (if smaller in size). Unlike the 'at', these groups of land were devoted to the cultivation of rice/paddy. In 1906, mal fields constituted 26% and Bahal, 16% of village land (Bandobast number 285, 1906-1926). In the mal land rice was broadcast cultivated, sometimes in combination with a leguminous crop while transplanted mono cropping of paddy was the norm in bahal

⁷⁴ Ibid.

fields. Traditionally only the bahal fields had access to irrigation from the village tanks (kota and muda). In the absence of intensive irrigation, land type on which it was sown was an important determining factor shaping the yields of the main staple and cash crop, paddy. Village people said that in the 'mal' fields, paddy had died all the time. Early ripening and lower yielding types of paddy were cultivated on the mal, berna and bahali land often intercropped with pulses. In 1906, long duration rice was grown in the bahal fields of which only a small percentage of fields, 43 acres, had obtained protective irrigation from village water reservoirs: kota and muda. Not even the headman's bhogra consisted entirely of bahal fields. It is evident from this discussion that the paddy, the main crop grown over 42.7% of village land, was extremely vulnerable and people tried as much as possible to spread their risks by growing different crops and by growing different kinds of Paddy (Bandobast number 285, 1906-1926).

While the impetus for intensive rice cultivation in Borasambar came from administrative dictates in the late nineteenth century, it was the relative prosperity of village headmen and local farmers who controlled the better yielding paddy fields that increased the felt necessity of growing paddy in the local society. Rice was economically the most valuable crop in the region. Wages were paid in husked rice, grain loan transactions always involved rice and rice could be more easily converted into cash. When people fell short of subsistence requirement, they depended on paddy loans from the village sahkars. Despite the predominance of rice in local discourse and exchanges, it took many decades for the upland style farming of Mahulkonda to change into paddy centric agriculture.

Village people who owned bahal fields in the past had to pay higher rates of malguzari and therefore many did not prefer to own such types of land. The 'at' land was more easily available and could even be borrowed easily from season to season from the village headman or wealthier farmers. While 'at' fields had to be at first reclaimed from forests, this process required less resource than levelling land into embanked fields. But upland fields also became nutrient deficient if the forest around it was permanently cleared. Moreover these fields were not accessible to tank irrigation. Paddy grown on these fields was small in quantities and could not meet the food and cash requirements of village households. Converting the 'at' fields to

rice growing land or buying existing rice land have been the two strategies adopted by Mahulkonda inhabitants throughout the twentieth century. But equity of distribution and availability were both important factors that decided how much land and types of field the villagers could possibly acquire. When forests were plentiful and not yet closed off through permanent land rights and forest reservation, villagers tried to acquire and cultivate a range of land. The at fields and fenced gardens provided a variety of vegetables, oilseeds, root crops and grains, including some rice. While mal and bahal fields produced Paddy. But as forestland grew scarce, cultivation had to intensify within the limits of the fields available within village areas. Thinning forests affected the fertility of uplands. Scarcity of land prevented fallowing. Partitioning at inheritance, increased competition over valuable permanent fields. Paddy took precedence over other crops but it was not easy for all villagers to undertake intensive cultivation of paddy till recently. By the middle of the twentieth century, scarcity of resources pushed many villagers out of cultivation into permanent labouring roles.

Village peoples' accounts suggest that the proportion of rice grown and making of rice fields grew consistently though waxing and waning according to the resources and time they could invest in cultivation. Richer villagers to reclaim fields from the forest recruited villagers and itinerant landless people searching for wage-work. However the periodic droughts from the mid 1960s had severely tested even the wealthier farmers' capacity to sustain rain-fed paddy cultivation. In those years poorer families had fled east, in search of work, many did not return for the next decade. Through this period cultivation of the upland fields were never entirely abandoned but accomplished through the grain or money remittances sent home to family members who had remained in the village. In 1979 a small dam was constructed on the semi perennial village stream, a tributary of the Ong River. The dam consolidated previous efforts by villagers who had attempted to construct temporary check dams on the stream to prevent sand casting on their agricultural fields. In the following year, government minor irrigation department financed the construction of canals. By mid-1980s canals were taking water to half the village lands, including the precarious and predominantly mal fields owned by the poorer lineages of Mahulkonda. The small irrigation project is believed to have injected life

in local farming initiating a modest 'green revolution' in Mahulkonda though it did not completely ease the woes of cultivation on marginal land.

Gradually higher yielding improved varieties of rice replaced local rice varieties⁷⁵ and more land, including patches of padia (waste), patra (scrub forest) and gochar (grazing land) were levelled and brought under wet rice cultivation. Economic value of agricultural fields increased.⁷⁶ And the process of converting upland fields into rice growing land gained a second impetus. This rejuvenation of cultivation was enabled not only through the availability of small-scale irrigation but also the growth of non-farm incomes of both wealthy and poorer villagers. From the early 1990s, more number of Mahulkonda farmers started using improved varieties of rice and more people had the time to invest in making rice fields.

Farmers expressed their initial amazement at the yield increases they had obtained when they first started using the 'improved' rice seeds. The usual reason offered in the village for their wholesale adoption of improved paddy was its higher yields and pest resistance compared to the local varieties and the importance of this factor for food security. Brundaban, a Goud man, told me how they had just one good bahal duli. After his father's death, when he was still small, his mother would always cultivate that duli (while she leased out the rest). They would always get 5 to 6 sacks of china, mahipal or jhuli (local long duration or late maturing traditional varieties) paddy from their best field. Now from that very duli, in good years, if it rained well, he could get 25-26 sacks of the Sarna variety of paddy, more if he could afford buy fertilizer in a particular season. The most popular type in 2002-3 was an improved long duration paddy variety called Sarna/Swarna (155 days). In the village this was grown using both bihura and rua methods and variable amounts of irrigation and chemical fertilizer inputs. People said that this rice variety unlike traditional varieties could grow on any kind of land though its yields varied with differential inputs of resources. While small-scale irrigation did not expand the agricultural season, which

⁷⁵ Panda (2005:53) notes that 32 rice varieties were grown during the zamindari period. Mahulkonda villagers could remember at least 12.

⁷⁶ The nineteen eighties saw a growth in agricultural production in eastern India. While the case of Orissa is not well documented, there is evidence from the neighbouring state of West Bengal. (Rogaly, B, Harriss-White, B and Bose, S 1999) The growth is attributed to spread of small irrigation systems that led to increased adoption of green revolution technologies.

was still restricted to 6 months, it has increased paddy yields. In exceptionally good rainfall years, farmers cultivating close to the small dam have managed grow a winter crop of groundnuts. While agrarian expansion in the past had created wealthy farmers and crop surpluses, modern irrigation had benefitted smaller and poorer farmers who have used family labour to reclaim land and invest migrant wage labour incomes to cultivate paddy. Shift to paddy cultivation has entailed the marginality of the diverse upland cropping pattern and fields but may have marginally improved the food security of poorer households.

Mahulkonda villagers were unambiguous about the gains and losses that they have made from this further intensification of cultivation. The Mahulkonda people clearly remember the regularity with which paddy died on the village mal fields. Even though a large number of local paddy types with variable characteristics and adapted to the conditions of the terrain had been grown in the past. Some of these crop types, people told me, grew tall to protect against inundation, others were small and fast growing and needed less water, and yet others had unique taste or fragrance. People speak of these paddy varieties fluently and with affection: dengbari, motikera, akashi, asanchuri, chinamal, jhuli, bhulu, sapuri, sarian, and kalasu. Whether these uniquely adapted Paddy crops offered protection against rain failures cannot be answered without accounting for other factors. The yields were highly variable, dependent on distinctive field types and when grown on less secure fields also prone to failure. When paddy cultivation moved to small parcels of the mal and converted 'at' fields, and people could no longer afford to maintain different types of fields, improved varieties with irrigation and other inputs led to better results than traditional types. While villagers remarked nostalgically on the produce of uplands and home gardens and traditional rice, regretting their lack of having a bit of at field to grow pulses and oil seeds and how such land could be had for asking in the past but now required money to rent for a season; what they emphasize most today is the importance of the increased yield of the rice crop.

Despite the modest benefits that have come to impoverished families, paddy cultivation remains in Borasambar remains highly vulnerable to drought as the declined yields of 2003 as against 2002 indicated. In the drought year the Mahulkonda fields suffer losses in yield of rice depending on their distance from the

village dam. While the upland harvests could be obtained even in the drought year (as 2002 showed), most villagers no longer had clearly demarcated upland fields and this harvest was inconsequential in comparison to Paddy. In 2002-03, only wealthier families who could afford to maintain a range of field types and very poor households had fields contiguous to the forest and away from the irrigation canal were growing upland crops. Favourably located forest, pastureland and upland fields have been affected through field constructing activities of small farmers. Dwindling forests and tree crops skirting the upland have increased competition over forest resources especially mahul trees that continue to provide important lean season incomes to impoverished village people.

Villagers did not think that the loss of diversity decreased household food security, since wage earnings from a number of sources have marginally increased in the same period that crop diversity has declined. Moreover they have no positive recollection of the past when things were different. Although land has become fragmented many erstwhile poorer village families have been able to acquire rice fields in contrast to earlier period when intensive rice cultivation and ownership of rice field was the domain of the specific social groups who had acquired or created such property at the turn of the last century.

Ecological constraints towards expansion and intensification of cultivation in forest areas like Borasambar was a point that was frequently discussed in the colonial administrative reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This was however something that they felt could be resolved through technological means such as expansion of irrigation and cultivation of suitable crops. But the more important consideration in these reports was the unsuitable styles of farming and the characteristics of local inhabitants both tenant-farmers and landlords, poor and primitive shifting cultivators who lacked 'industry' to enable the transformation of politically disturbing forest areas to more controlled and productive places.

5.4 Colonial discourses: Vulnerability of Agriculture and 'Aboriginal' farming

In 1899-1900 there was a devastating famine in the Central Provinces. Widespread mortality was reported in zamindari villages of Sambalpur. Famine mortality came in the wake of agrarian expansion, railways and increase in export of rice from Sambalpur district, enabling colonial administrators to draw a variety of comparisons between styles of cultivation and kinds of people who lived in the region.⁷⁷ 'Aboriginal' traits and styles of farming were a recurrent theme in Famine Commission Enquiry Reports. In these accounts the causality of famine were connected with primitive styles of cultivation that prevailed in the zamindari. The growing of maize and bean as garden crops, consuming of hill-millet and coarse grains such as kodon and kutki and mahua, fruit and roots from the forest, was described as the characteristic of 'aboriginal' villages (Cradock 1898, Dewar 1906). The expansion of cultivation as well as the migration of cultivator castes was viewed as beneficial for the progress of the zamindari.

According to the settlement officer of Sambalpur district, F.W Dewar, one third of the tenant-cultivators of the district consisted of groups such as Binjhals, Kondhs, Gonds, Gandas and Kisans as groups that continued to 'exhibit aboriginal propensities.' Living in the wilder parts of the zamindari, they lived on cultivating millets, oilseeds and maize, depending on forest and wage labour and raising silk worm cocoons as in the (pre-colonial period). These groups were compared and contrasted with the other half of tenant population, groups like Kultas, Brahmans, Telis and Malis, who were described as 'approved members of the Hindu social scale' and who cultivated more than half the land of the district. The poverty of the 'aboriginals' was described as a 'racial trait' since they did not grow rice or practise permanent field cultivation. Living in poorer villages, the latter suffered disproportionately from the calamitous consequences during famines (Dewar 1906).

⁷⁷ Peter Harnetty (1977) has observed, cropping patterns in the Central Provinces were being greatly modified through 'the impact of prices and of innovation in means of transport in the late 19th century. This period also witnessed 'a great increase in the export of food-grains from the CP' and very high famine mortality (Harnetty 1977:368). Rice grew in importance as an export crop during this period and sugarcane cultivation declined through import of cheap sugar. The famine years (1894-1900) also led farmers to shift between dry crops like Jowar, Kodo and broadcast rice in bad years and water intensive transplanted rice (Sambalpur) or wheat (in Chattisgarh) in good years (ibid: 350-353).

Borasambar was considered to be a hilly tract with backward agriculture and aboriginal population. Except for the valley of the Ong River made fertile by silt and hill drainage, the land of the zamindari was considered 'inferior' (O'Malley 1909:106). More than half of Borasambar was covered in Sal, Saj, Kendu and Bamboo Forests and populated by bears, panthers, tigers and wild buffaloes in 1870 (Grant 1970). Touring officers charting the forests of the Provinces lost their way in the zamindari (Brandis 1864).⁷⁸ The most prevalent form of agriculture in the region was the dahi. The dahi or 'dhya' was a form of shifting cultivation that was believed to destroy valuable trees and had met with administrative disapproval. The Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces had described shifting cultivation as the 'barbarous practice of hill tribes'. But a gradual rather than radical transformation was recommended since 2 million people were dependent on 'dhya' cultivation. He had believed that any sudden measures to stop the practice would result in people resorting to plunder, rebellion and ultimately abandoning the sparsely populated area defeating the larger purpose of expanding cultivation. Temple's suggestion was containment in specific areas rather than prohibition of dhya (Temple 1864). The Central Provinces Forest rules of 1862 and the Forest Act of 1878, made the practice of 'dhya' by hill tribes on areas with valuable timber trees like teak and sal and on ground that had been left fallow for less than twelve years illegal (Rangarajan 1996:99, 107). The Court of Wards report about Borasambar from 1896 mentioned how steps were being taken to curb the widely prevalent practise of shifting cultivation.⁷⁹ Eventually, more than administrative restriction, the in-migration of farming caste groups from Mahanadi valley areas to Borasambar and settling them in the new villages that were being carved out of forests, proved to be a better strategy to stem the practise of extensive cultivation.

Compared to the forests of neighbouring zamindaris, Borasambar forests were remote from lines of communication. 'The big estate of Borasambar has fair timber

⁷⁸ Memorandum on the Progress Report of the Forest Administration, Central Provinces. By Dr.D.Brandis. Conservator of Forest on special duty. 2nd February 1864/ Four Reports on the Forests in the Eastern Portion of the Central Provinces by Captain J.E Burton, H.M.'s 91st Foot and Lieutenant J.Forsyth, Bengal Staff Corps.

⁷⁹ The resolution on the Management by Government of Private Estates in the Central Provinces for the Revenue year 1894-95, ending September 1896. Nagpur: Printed at the Secretariat Press. 1896

forest which has of late been opened up, but their distance from a railway prevents full exploitation' (Dewar 1906). The difficult location of Borasambar is also cited in later reports to explain why zamindari forests had remained un-surveyed and systematic commercial felling had not taken place in its forests (Hamid 1927).⁸⁰ Thus increasing the population of the zamindari and farming the newly broken land created from forests rather than conserving the plentiful forest was the main concern of administrators of that period. By 1886, there were 358 villages in Borasambar with an estimated cultivated area of 40960 acres.⁸¹

An early forest administration report mentioned the soil in Borasambar as 'scarcely fit for inferior crops of rice' (Brandis 1864). Land in Sambalpur district as a whole was described as undulating, full of ravines and abrupt isolated hills, sandy ridges and broken by drainage channels flowing from the hills to the Mahanadi River. Only a small proportion of land was considered suitable for rice cultivation and a 'considerable proportion of area' was under upland farming with non-rice crops and long periods of fallow (Fuller 1891). But during the second land settlement operations, Sambalpur style land classification for rent purposes was applied to 157 'better cultivated and well occupied' villages of Borasambar in the valley of the Ong river, while the 277 western village termed 'forested and backward' were assessed using a different set of criteria (Dewar 1906: 84). An important innovation of the colonial administration that is worth mentioning is that, in pre-colonial Sambalpur, khalsa areas, it was the rice growing lands that were untaxed while revenue was paid in kind through various cash crops like sugarcane, sesame and cotton (Ouseley 1844, 1846). By the early twentieth century, rice had emerged not only as the main food crop but also the principal cash crop of the region. Cultivating rice had acquired a commercial incentive for local farmers and the crop itself was like cash equivalent in places like Borasambar villages. Among the important themes in the settlement reports of this time was the vulnerability of rice cultivation and the poor cultivation of 'aboriginal races' that constituted a large extent of zamindari populations, being village headmen as well as tenants.

⁸⁰ Panda (2005) mentions the export of Rosewood, Sal and Piasal trees from Borasambar zamindari.

⁸¹ V/24/2567: Resolution on the Management by Government of Private Estates in the Central Provinces during the year ending September 1886. Nagpur: Printed at the Chief Commissioner's Office Press. 1887.

The famine enquiry commission report had cited the spread of wet rice cultivation in Sambalpur district as the reason why its farmers could withstand famine better, describing the export of surpluses during the 1900 famine as evidence of its immunity (Craddock 1898). The land settlement officer F.W Dewar had however described the export of rice through the railways as the 'draining of the district' and mentioned the great difficulties of distributing relief in landlocked Borasambar through lack of transport and labour as the reason for the high mortality in famine years. When the railways came to Sambalpur in 1894, the resulting 'opening up' of the district had facilitated the export of rice even from far flung zamindaris like Borasambar, but distributing relief rice in the scarcity affected areas could not take place due to inaccessibility - lack of road, transportation and after the famine, labour to cart or carry rice in head loads (Dewar 1906:190-191). The famine commissioner had argued that while earlier famine episodes led to desertion of villages, improvements in cultivation enhanced the ability of farmers to withstand famines. In official discourse therefore the cause of famine rested not on the spread of permanent field cultivation on marginal land but primarily on the inflexible cultural attributes of the aboriginal.

While the agricultural skills of groups like the Kultha farmers were well recognized even in pre-colonial period, their dominance as headmen and tenants and elevated social standing and wealth in zamindari areas like Borasambar was a direct outcome of colonial intervention in agriculture. In pre-colonial Borasambar, social status did not derive from practising sedentary cultivation and revenue-farmers were not the natural leaders of the society. Colonial rule provided a more secure environment for members of the specialist farming castes to acquire wealth and enhance their social standing from the expansion of permanent cultivation in forested areas like Borasambar. At the same time, erstwhile forest dwellers like the Binjhals pushed out of their forested domains and with various restrictions on their pre-colonial pursuits and curtailment of political autonomy, struggled to survive and re-invent their identities as farming people. This was an especially difficult project in the absence of land control which was rapidly escaping them and getting parcelled outwards to other groups through purchases of land or farmed out village leases as shown in the previous chapter.

In the long run, agriculture in Borasambar that had developed under new cropping pattern, taxation regime and market opportunities, remained vulnerable to droughts and faced gradual crisis of sustainability. But this observation does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the zamindari was drought secure or famine resistant in the pre-colonial period or that its inhabitants lived in an ecologically adjusted pre-modern paradise. At least for western Orissa, there exists limited information about pre-colonial famine episodes, the consequences for the inhabitants and how these were resolved, outside of the scattered reports in the colonial archives. What is of greater concern here is to understand how the beliefs and aspirations of forest dwellers including their expressions of wellbeing and poverty were shaped by experiences of various administrative regimes in the recent past. When contemporary villagers describe their poverty through their inability to farm, and compare the indigence of their ancestors with the wealth of the headman families, they sometimes reproduce colonial discourses about farmers and non-farmers, even though their recounted experiences highlight the social and economic differentiation that grew upon and stabilised both caste distinction and unequal access to land in the general background of numerous impediments of practising agriculture under rain-fed conditions in Borasambar villages.

5.5 Farmers and Sahukars

Village women often described the wealthy families of the past as *kuri ludria praja*⁸² or farmers who were able to grow 160 sacks (each sack roughly 75 kg) of Paddy in a good year. Wealthy families were described as those with 'juna ole' that likened them to the low-lying bahal fields. The ability to farm was synonymous with the ability to grow rice. However in Borasambar, growing water intensive Paddy had not been the easiest of tasks, even for better off farmers in the recent past.

Among village people, the gountias were best situated to produce large quantities of paddy over and above their consumption requirements due to the extent and quality of their Bhogra fields. If they had many low lying rice fields and access to tank

⁸² 1 *ludar* consists of 8 sacks of Paddy or husked rice weighing 75 kg each, *kuri ludar* means, 20x8 = 160 sacks of paddy)

irrigation the surplus they produced would be even greater. An elderly member of the Mahulkonda nua-gountia family had told me that in the past, their household would get about 50-100 ludar (400 – 800 sacks) of paddy from their bhogra land. During this time a majority of praja farmers could barely grow 10 sacks of Paddy in a season. Gountias often received a variety of crops in lieu of money, for malguzari payments and as 'bheti' or gifts. These were stored in special rooms called bhadri and sold when grains prices were high.

The person who became the Mahulkonda gountia, in 1942, by buying the 'village' from the zamindar was a son of the gountia of Lorain, a neighbouring forest village. Buying gountiahi contracts was a way in which gountia families of the past consolidated their wealth. In both Mahulkonda and Lorain, the gountia family had ploughed their land using eight ox drawn ploughs. By custom, the gountia fields were harvested by the village praja through free labour contribution called 'beth-begari' or bethi. Though the number of days such 'free labour' could be demanded was stipulated by legislation. *'On the day of the harvest the village chowkidar would call out: tomorrow we go and harvest the gountia's dhan with our sickles, ho. The whole village responding to that call would come out with their sickles and harvest the gountia's dhan from morning till sunset (belburia) and there they cook and eat. Only for a day.'*(field notes)

For most of their agricultural work, the Mahulkonda Gountia family employed as many as eight farm servants who worked for Paddy wages. During the harvest festival, the gountia family organized a feast and their farm servants distributed small gifts of sweet food to the praja families who reciprocated in turn. This image of the gountia as a benevolent patriarch and patron is often belied in village narratives, which describe them as powerful and wealthy people though fewer stories are remembered in Mahulkonda about cruelty or harshness meted out by them.

The gountias of the zamindari period were powerful and wealthy persons who held great sway over people in the local society. Their powers derived from the authority of the zamindar. Apart from filling in the malguzari in time for which gountias were given special rewards by the zamindar, their other responsibility was to host the zamindar's hunt-parties ('haka') and feed their large entourages. Mahulkonda

farmers remember the frequent calls they would get in the past to take part in the 'kheda' or chase as the hunt parties are described in the village. Mahulkonda people said that in the past the gountia were respected. If the gountia did not like a praja, 'they could have them beaten and driven out of the village'. In forested villages, gountias were disproportionately powerful since the praja were too impoverished. In some forest villages, gountia family descendants described their ancestors as pioneers who had obtained mere forests from the zamindar and battled with wild animals to create fertile villages. All the six panchayat heads in the administrative block where Mahulkonda is situated were from the families of gountias. In older and more established villages like Mahulkonda, there had been many wealthy praja-farmers who rivalled the power of the gountia.

Mahulkonda villagers often remembered the powerful praja families from the past. These were farmers who had large granaries, gold, many farm servants and some connection with the zamindari administration. The present is often marked with reference to the declining power of these key village families. Wealth of these farming families is attributed to their accumulation of large landholdings and past business of holding fields on mortgage land and lending paddy on interest. Such families were described as sahuikars. Mahulkonda sahuikars like in other eastern villages were no more than farmers who had belonged to the Kultha and Brahman jati groups. David Hardiman's description of the 'wealthy dominant peasant family' can be well applied to the Mahulkonda sahuikars. Such families put other peasants in a position of obligation by providing loans at critical junctures and the loans had to be repaid in various ways, in produce, labour service, show of loyalty, respect and enabled them to control village land by obtaining temporary rights for cultivation. It was the peasant family's perpetual struggle with productivity and need to maintain social status that enabled the wealthier peasants to obtain a hold in the local society (Hardiman 1996: 105-117).

One of the powerful sahuikars was a Brahman family who the story goes were given 'badla' or exchange land in Mahulkonda by the Borasambar zamindar in the early twentieth century. When the Binjhal gountias lost their office, a member of this family had become the de-facto village manager, representing the zamindar, through the position of 'mukadam' and as a member of the 'revenue-panch'. Along with other

wealthy praja, the Brahman mukadam had organised villagers to dam the village stream in the 1950s. When the small dam was finally made permanent by the irrigation department in the mid 1980s, the family's land had become secure. Later when an irrigation canal had threatened to submerge part of their rice fields, the jama members had been able to use their connections in the district bureaucracy, to ensure that the canal skirted their fields.

Like other 'jharia' or forest Brahmans, of Sambalpur, Mahulkonda Brahman families were mainly cultivators and traders rather than priests. An elderly member of this jama told me how all the three branches of their family had very good 'jami-badi' in two villages. But initially their land had been poor quality, where paddy died frequently. Over a period of time, their ancestor had acquired many bahal fields to build the family's land base. The village record of rights supports this reported accumulation of land in the form of many small fields. At one point they were using 4 ox drawn ploughs to farm their land. Their wealth had come from cultivation and grain lending. In recent years the jama had declined through the differential ability of its descendants to acquire non-farming employment. My informant had described with great regret the passing of the time when village people would work a full day for merely a meal of rice and perform many unasked for tasks just to please the sahuakar. Still in 2002, the branches of this sahuakar jama ranked as wealthy farmers and rural employers, as some of them were changing with times to become brokers of government cash for work projects, others were investing in private transportation business and yet others were selling some of land, the worst fields first. Still in 2002 when much of the paddy in Mahulkonda had perished in drought these families had managed a reasonable harvest with the support of irrigation water from the small dam.

To illustrate the family's wealth in the past, my informant described how their family had lent paddy on interest to the gountias of nearby villages. Once 36 ox-carts laden with paddy had blocked up the village road. Lending to gountias could be risky, as many times they would not honour their debt. Providing grain loans to praja was a better investment as it always came back with interest. Grain loans called 'lag' formed the basis of the power and wealth of the sahuakar families. For 1 khondi (approximately 20 kg) paddy borrowed people had to pay back 1.5 khondi at the end

of six months. Only praja families with an assured harvest at the end of the kharif season were eligible for these grain loans. Inability to pay back grain loans with interest could result in loss of valuable fields by an impoverished praja. Several villagers told me how their fathers or mothers had lost valuable garden land to a Brahman sahuakar family through their inability to pay back 'lag'. Taking 'lag' made village praja dependent on sahuakar families and contributed to their long-term impoverishment if they failed to repay in grains.

Sahuakar families built their grain stores through this business and sold paddy at the right time to the Marwari traders who lived in roadside or market villages. Sahuakari was a secular profession and any farming family with a surplus harvest could start a trade. A village woman told me how her maternal grandfather, who was a wealthy praja, would give lag to praja from several different villages and by the end of the year '40 sacks of paddy would grow to 60 sacks'. But the families that prospered from this practise were those who could sustain and increase their landholdings and be in this trade for several decades. But building and maintaining paddy surpluses in the agrarian conditions discussed before, one needed to be a gountia or a sahuakar to begin with. In Mahulkonda and its neighbourhood these were mainly a few families of Brahman and Kultha cultivators.

One way in which some praja-farming families managed to accumulate a surplus was by monopolizing and cultivating the low-lying bahal fields. The surplus paddy was also used to make grain wage payments and grain advances to labouring families. These desperately poor families who sold their labour for daily meals were the bedrock of sahuakari accumulation. Through the availability of this very cheap labour, forestland could be cleared and levelled to prepare more fields to grow rice. This is a process that continues even at present. Moreover only sahuakar families could spare the time and expense that was needed to make rice fields out of upland, and wait out the period that it would take for the land to yield.⁸³ They could also strategize to obtain established rice fields usually from praja who failed to repay their loans. Even at present wealthy families dominated the intensely competitive land market for existing fields of known productivity. Mahulkonda villagers described their

⁸³ F.G Bailey describes a similar process of accumulation and consolidation by villagers who had turned sahuakars in the kondhmal

relationship with the big sahuakar families, by highlighting the greed of the latter and acknowledging their own great dependence on such families in the past. But all farming families were not Sahukars, some were known simply as 'thila ghoru' or lineages that neither borrowed nor lent paddy.

Among all the farming families in the village, two lineages of Haldiya Teli group had been the earliest praja to acquire large expanses of land in Mahulkonda. Pursuing their traditional occupation as traders in the forest zamindaris and kingdoms, they had often lent money to the old Binjhal gountias and accumulated fields at a time when Brahmans and Kulthas farmers were yet to establish themselves. They had strong presence in the area. Some villages in the neighbourhood consisted only of this jati group and gountias belonged to the same caste group. However Haldiya Teli people had lacked connection with the zamindari administration. Being from the Patna area (Bolangir district) they also lacked ties, unlike the Brahmans to the district administration in the developed areas of eastern Bargarh. Many descendants of this jama in Mahulkonda had survived because they had owned better lands and established fertile fields. An elderly farmer, Prasado from the Haldiya Teli jati, had recalled how his elders did not have to 'make' land from the forest. His father and grandfather had harvested 100-150 sacks of paddy, cultivated sugarcane in summer, and cultivated many vegetables using their brick lined well in the garden. Unlike most villagers, what they had lacked was upland fields. These they had 'borrowed' easily in the past to cultivate pulses and oilseeds.

Prasado was one of five brothers who had stayed afloat by cultivating jointly and splitting the produce rather than partition their land. In their youth they had not taken paddy loans and never went for wage work (bhuti) described as 'other peoples' work' but laboured only on their own land. For Prasado, the watershed year for farmers like them was 1987, when village people did not allow the gountia to cut the tank embankment to irrigate his dying paddy on the bhogra. It was customary in Borasambar villages to allow the gountia precedence to the water of the central kota or tank in the village in the event of drought. That show of 'power', Prasado had used the English word, by poor villagers had signalled for him the end of farming in Mahulkonda. Although the superior quality of Prasado's jama land was the subject of much discussion in the village, it lay near the tail end of the village irrigation project.

In 2002, Prasado's sons had also migrated like poorer praja for seasonal wage labour. As farmers who used family labour for cultivation, Prasado was not perturbed like the sahuikars by the rising cost of labour in the village but he spoke about their growing need for cash incomes to support farming and subsistence. Increasingly, it was families with non-farming incomes that were better able to continue as farmers. When such people, held government jobs with a steady salary, the pinnacle of success in Mahulkonda, they were called the new sahuikars.

The rengali jama of Kultha farmers had conformed closely to the jati stereotype about being hardworking and frugal and devoted to agriculture and pursuit of land. My informant Bhagobano's (60 years) great-grandfather had settled in Mahulkonda after obtaining 20 acres of land as a gift from his brother in law. This was not the best quality land and for many years they had cleared the thorny growth of buro and khair bushes on their berna and bahali type of land, before sowing paddy. Bhagobano and his brothers had made their fields cultivable with their own labour. In his father's time their homestead garden had flourished with vegetables, maize and tobacco. In summer they had cultivated sugarcane and made sugar. But their paddy yield was very low in those days and they did not have upland fields to grow pulses.

Bhagobano's father was the middle brother and his land share was only 7 acres. Moreover he had a large family of 8 children. The 20-30 sacks of Paddy that they harvested lasted only till the beginning of summer. Instead of borrowing from Mahulkonda sahuikars, they depended on their wealthy kin. Sometimes they would get 'lag' grain loans from the landed but childless paternal aunt in the neighbouring village. In some years they had tended a large herd of cows from wealthy relatives in another village, which fetched them some additional income as well as manure for their rice fields. Whenever possible brothers had taken fields on lease and farmed together to avoid partitioning the 7 acres. Despite their meagre land shares and large family, the rengali jama had not dwindled into a wage working family.

It was not simply their cooperation and pooling of resources that had helped them but also the fact that in this family several members had persisted with their school education and obtained government employment. With this additional income they had made some astute joint land purchases. By late 1980s part of their inherited

land, favourably located with respect to the new irrigation project had started getting irrigation from the village dam. Salaried people were the new sahuikars. Unlike in the past, Bhagobano's brothers did not give 'lag'. Instead they purchased good land whenever these became available in several contiguous villages, held irrigated fields on short term leases (chirrul or kontoria), hired wage workers to reclaim and cultivate land and also engaged less prosperous kin members in managing their farms. When Bhagobano's son obtained government employment, a rare event in recent times, their status had improved further. They were now viewed as a family who were on the path of consolidation. By continuing to invest in agriculture and apparently supporting the less successful branches, they reproduce the cultural assumptions about jati, farming community and wellbeing and villagers often gave their example to justify their belief in hard work, agriculture and (education) as the key to emerge from the hungry forest dwelling past.

My aim in this section has been to illustrate the circumstances and ways in which wealth has been accumulated in the village society and the various factors that have made praja farmers to slip in and out of wellbeing. The pattern of social and economic hierarchy that emerged in the early 1900s, with the headmen and sahuikar families at the top, the wageworkers at the bottom and the farmers who moved between these two extremes has not been transformed. But compared to the past, people felt that the power of the highest segment has declined in recent times. The sentiments that are produced by this phenomenon are mixed and ambivalent.

Farmers and wage workers, are greatly invested in the local agricultural system much more than the erstwhile wealthy families who desire to move out of agrarian livelihoods but are unable to do so due to their lack of educational capital and high competition from the more developed parts of the state. As one person in Mahulkonda put it, they needed sahuikars even at present not just for agricultural purposes but also to campaign for and attract government resources but did not wish to be 'controlled' by them as they had been in the past. Wealthy villagers, who chose to leave their fields fallow or sell their land, invite bitter censure. When the reasonably well to do farmer of an erstwhile sahuikar family was seen clearing rocks and pebbles from his field with his wife, for several days in a row in summer, village people had not commented on the family's decline but about their miserly nature and

how they were robbing another person's bhuti (wage work). A Brahman family that had sold various fields and openly declared agriculture as unprofitable were criticised by villagers using typically gendered statements such as the sahuakar was under his wife's thumb and being a woman she did not value farming. Mahulkonda gountia family, (looking towards an urban future), and exceptional are criticized the most for their high degree of detachment from village affairs. Villagers blame them for the failure of their village to produce a panchayat head despite the relatively higher educational levels and agrarian resources of the village. In 2003, when the village graziers demanded a revision of their annual payment just before the kharif season was to start, the Gountia's family instead of bargaining with them had declared that they would hire their own grazier to look after their own herd and that they could afford to fence all their fields. This declaration had displeased the villagers even further since it put aside the custom of common grazing of the village herd. Eventually the graziers' pay had been increased marginally and the situation was resolved for the time being. The traditions of the gountia period despite their abuse of power and exploitative of the poverty of forest dwellers, therefore have served certain needs for villagers and farming wealth associated with this regime was viewed as the key to subsistence and continuity of moral order in an uncertain world.

But the drought year of 2002 revealed the plight of many cultivator families of established jama groups despite their average size landholdings (5-7 acres). When one of the Kultha cultivators sold his fruit laden Tamarind trees to another family for brickmaking in summer, I had asked him why he chose to sell such valuable trees to be burnt up as fuel wood in the brick kiln? He had claimed that they were facing hunger that year because of the loss of his entire paddy harvest. Obtaining 'lag' was not possible, as sahuakars did not maintain paddy stores. Some of them now ran village shops that gave small credits to migrant wageworkers backed by some assured cash income. Felling of mahul trees had slowed down due to the high prices of the crop. By selling his clutch of well-tended trees he could at least save his fields for the next season. In this family, the crisis caused by the drought was worsened when the adult son went to work for a Brahman sahuakar family in the kharif instead of suffering hunger and pooling his labour with his father and brother to jointly cultivate their land. The situation may have been temporary and the next year, with good rainfall and prospect of harvest, the son may have gone back to labour on the

family farm. But without family labour and non-farm wages cultivator families, especially with rain-fed fields, were hard pressed to survive.

Another elderly Kultha farmer, whom I was surprised to find doing wage work on the government 'food for work' tank building site, had defended his presence by arguing that there was no shame in farmers breaking earth or villagers serving the sarkar (government) but had also admitted that their drought affected harvest had been so meagre that it got exhausted when a sudden surge of (baha) marriage and ek-shia (birth) invitations came upon them in spring. Later in the year I had seen his younger son ploughing a wealthier kinsman's fields. The mantle of kinship that often saved the distressed Kultha farmers from resorting to the sahkars was made possible by the fact that in general they were a relatively prosperous jati group and one that had remained engaged with agriculture. The point for the people of established farming jama was to avoid leasing and selling their fields at any cost by which they feared they would descend to the category of impoverished villagers who have long struggled to farm.

5.6 'Too Poor to Farm': Marginal Farmers

People in Mahulkonda describe Suratha, who belonged to the Binjhal old headman family as a diligent farmer. This is unusual since Binjhal men are usually subject to dominant caste stereotypes that emphasize their poor farming skills and highlight their abilities of tree cutting, forest clearing and field labour. That summer Suratha's garden (bari) had been empty, graced only by the drying twigs of the previous chilly crop. Protected by a thorny fence and a makeshift gate were two large, fruit laden lemon trees. Lemon trees were so rare in the area that the ability to grow them could mark one out as a farmer. Suratha had always struggled to be a cultivator. His account indicates how cultural stereotypes about jati were social facts as people draw upon existing frameworks of meaning that justified the distribution of resources available to people in specific social positions and which defined whether they were able to farm or not.

After the juna gountia family had lost their Bhogra (chapter 4), the descendants had managed to recover some fields in different outlying parts of the village. Suratha's father, who had learnt masonry work and built houses for people, had bought some upland fields. Much of the 5 acres that he and his two brothers cultivated 'was all at, patra and tree stumps but not a single useful tree.' Before his marriage, he and his elder brother had worked on the new fields clearing it of tree stumps. Later he and his wife had planted fruit trees including the young neem trees that grew there at present, made a garden land and dug a well to water it. In 2003, Suratha and his wife were sharing a field with their cousin's family to grow onions, jhunga beans, tomatoes, greens and watermelons. A temporary well had been dug that would be closed after summer. The same field would be planted with paddy during the rain. Their farming in the next season would be affected because they had sold their experienced plough oxen in summer for Rs.11000 and bought a younger pair for Rs.6000. They had needed the money to help with his wife's younger brother's marriage. This help was expected, even if it meant 'by cutting their own stomach' because his wife's family had helped them in times of need. He knew that the inexperienced plough would mean poorer farming that year. He worried that the water in the dug wells wouldn't last the whole growing season of the crops. He said,

'bari chash meant that someone would have to be constantly on the watch, tending and taking care of it like they were your children for 4-5 months. During that time you couldn't go anywhere or do anything. At the end what did you have to show for it?' Suratha gave the typical village answer to justify his inability to farm that it was almost impossible to break even and what would the family eat while the crops grew? *It was only the 'thila ghoru'* he repeated the village saying, who were better able to cultivate *'than little people like us.'*

Most impoverished people in Mahulkonda owned smaller number of fields (0.5-5 acres), few inherited, some purchased, and that were without exception scrub covered, rocky uplands. Unlike farmers, discussed in the previous section they have spent less time in making land, over the past decades, since their labour was always spent elsewhere. Sometimes making fields had taken many years, over one or two generations. A middle aged Binjhal man told me how the land that his father had bought from the gountia family was covered by forest and how his father had spent

most of life converting it into chash-jami. Hence the crops they grew were always low yielding and subject to the idiosyncrasies of the fields. They had tended to focus on making small gardens, like the 'aboriginals' of the past, sometimes foregoing paddy cultivation altogether.

Some families, like Suratha's also had a few low lying, levelled rice growing fields. These could be commonly mortgaged, leased out or even sold in times of exceptional need. Suratha's elder brother had told me how he had 'brought money' against his best field, a 0.5 acre duli irrigated by the village irrigation project many times. First in the early 1990s, to meet the expenses of his elder daughter's marriage, he had leased out the field for Rs.1600. These were chirrul contracts, in which fields went back to the owners after the agreed upon period was over. Under kontoria contracts, land returned to the owner only if the money given in the beginning is paid back. After four years he had got the field back for cultivation. Then after two years he had leased the field out again for his elder son's marriage, this time for Rs.4000 for four years. While irrigation water had converted these fields into rice growing land which acted as emergency assets, not cultivating these better yielding fields throughout their lives meant that farming itself did not contribute to their subsistence and they were not growing as farmers.

Leasing out fields was a strategy used by impoverished Binjhal and Goud villagers, who often owned a few fields. In recent times money that could be obtained from leasing fields, appear to have increased, (though real increase can be obtained only after adjusting prices). In the early 1980s when Brijo, a Goud farmer's mother had died, he had leased out his biggest rice field for Rs.45. For four years, he had not cultivated paddy. Later he had leased it out again, for Rs.1100, to pay bride price for his own marriage. Through these transactions that are oral agreements made in presence of witnesses, people temporarily forsake their rights to cultivate their land. It is said that before the 1980s, when bondhoki was prevalent, things were different. Some families told me how their mal fields had been lost permanently after they had been unable to repay grain loans. In 2003, I witnessed several instances of poorer families, leasing out their paddy growing fields to meet lifecycle rites and medical emergencies. Thus, the gains from irrigation were hardly enjoyed by poorer villagers as they were rarely cultivating their better yielding paddy fields. Often land-leasing

families were headed by widowed women whose economic situation had from the absence of male family labour (see chapter 8). Since these contracts emerged from critical need, the land-lease buyers had greater bargaining power than the field-owners, who ended up accepting whatever price the former determined as just.

Impoverished families also suffered from loss of farm equipment through their need to convert all assets into liquid cash to meet various emergencies. By selling plough oxen at the end of the season rather than feeding and caring for it through summer farming was compromised. Bedar, a Binjhal man had showed me how his recently purchased plough oxen were so untrained and young that they kept sitting down in between ploughing in the peak kharif season. An elderly Goud man (50-60 years) told me how after his father's death and soon after when his own son had died, he had 'lost his hal'. For the next 15 years he could not keep his own plough oxen and had to borrow the plough from trusted families. Waiting to borrow another farmer's plough, delayed farming leading to poorer yields.

Poorer families also consumed the paddy stock that they stored as seed grains every year. Sahukars tended to buy the better quality but pesticide infused paddy seeds from the co-operatives or block office that yielded well but could not be eaten. In 2002, several Mahukonda families had taken the decision to consume their paddy seeds. In case of the Saonra family that I spoke to it was a calculated decision. Their land was very high and after waiting for rain they had ultimately decided not to sow paddy. Lakhmi had said she was glad they hadn't because it would have been a complete waste and at least they had the seed-grain (bihano) to eat. Another Binjhal family, whose field was close to the village dam, had been beset with emergencies. They had just been able to avoid selling their stock of Paddy seeds by pawning all their bell metal vessels and gold jewellery but were not certain if they would be able to buy plough oxen that year.

Impoverished families who did not farm regularly were not eligible for obtaining 'lag.' Instead they depended greatly on wage work. In the past, they had worked for decades as tied farm servants for gountia and sahuakar families for grain advances. This meant that land making and self-cultivation had always been secondary concerns in peak agricultural months. As Suratha said, 'No, I don't remember a time

when we could have lived without wage work.' At present these labouring families migrated to the canal areas of Bargarh district or worked exclusively at government food for work projects in summer. Sometimes delays in land partition meant that some Binjhal families had not cultivated their land for 10 years. Wage work in the village did not provide the capital necessary to invest in agriculture in the next season.

Most people were simply 'too poor to farm'. A Binjhal woman had told me laughing, that their seeds were poor quality, all mixed, their land did not get good water, the paddy was sown directly ('buna') rather than transplanted ('rua'), and so the yield was poor and paddy was of poor quality mixed with 'jhoer' and other such wild types. Many articles could still be exchanged for paddy at the village shops and itinerant traders. But the paddy they cultivated was of such poor quality that shops would not accept it. But some labouring families do invest in farming small fields whenever the circumstances permit.

Some village families have started farming on share cropping basis, investing their seasonal wage incomes in cultivation. I spoke to Minoketo a Goud farmer just after he had harvested a moong crop. The dark black green, slightly hairy beans were spread out in two string cots where the pods lay popping and crackling in the sun. They were five brothers he had said and once the land was partitioned after their marriage, each share came around to 0.3 acres or nothing. To supplement that next to nothing field, he had taken land on 'kar' (a share cropping arrangement) from several different sahuakar households. The condition was that after harvesting the crops, he would give half to the landowner. While the moong harvest, had turned out well, he was certain that he would not get a paddy harvest that season. Things would be hard that year, but he had consoled himself by thinking that they were a fairly small family and he would make up the difference by migrating for wage work later in the year. Such share cropping arrangements were becoming possible with sahuakars reluctant to farm all their fields through labour shortages and their other businesses and willingness of migrant workers to pay cash or enter into 'kar' contracts to obtain annual farming rights.

Many impoverished families were jama that had simply lacked ownership of agricultural fields and had depended in the past on borrowing upland fields from season to season. In the past when the padia-patra or waste forestland was plentiful, the gountia would allow the sukhbasi (landless) to cultivate these. An elderly man from the Keunt family had told me that that his elders had not been successful in obtaining permanent farmland. However in his father's time, they often requested the gountia for a portion of a field to cultivate chickpeas, pulses, upland rice and vegetables. In recent times people who did not have farmland have taken the initiative to carve out small fields on demarcated forestland. For instance, the dalit families of Mahulkonda did not own any land apart from the fields associated with the Chowkidari or watchman's tenure. Some like Bibhishan and his brother had made fields in the reserve forest that skirted Mahulkonda. They had cultivated their forest field for decades before villagers complained to the forest department. For the last five or six years they have been locked into a serious litigation with the forest department over rights to this land. So much so that they were beginning to wonder whether the land was worth the high cost of legal wrangling.

5.7 Conclusion

The above discussion tries to show that for impoverished families, living up to the village ideal of farming and material and moral wellbeing remains more of an ideal than practise. The increased opportunities of seasonal wage work, government welfare projects and their greater use of family labour has meant that they had could make them, in good years, slightly closer to this ideal. By demonstrating their ability to farm, they have also challenged the association of farming with intrinsic traits of jati. What has supported this argument is the emergence from hitherto impoverished jama of non-farming adivasi jati, persons who have obtained government employment. Through their land buying and farming activities these have joined the ranks of the new sahuikars, often taking the help of impoverished kin to operate their farms. But the symbolic relevance of farming is sustained by the majority who depend on rural employment provided by the sahuikars, struggle from year to year on their meagre fields and remain deeply invested in the local farming society from their allocated social position.

In an article written in 1979, and based in western India Donald Attwood argues that, the rich farmers had suffered from depression in prices while the poorer have been able to buy fields using migrant labouring incomes. Market prices of crops, state policy and weather influenced local patterns of mobility. Land holding patterns were also influenced by the distribution of other kinds of resources such as education, off farm employment, administrative and political connections. 'Multidirectional cyclical mobility' of cultivators was also affected by the changes in the size and composition of farming families (Shanin 1972, Chayanov 1966). Attwood's study pointed out that larger landholders often sold their fields and poorer and landless people often bought small parcels of land and therefore land did not really flow from the poor to the rich. Impact of irrigation which facilitates commercialization, also indicated more equitable distribution of land. In the absence or slow development of mechanization small landholders who invest family labour in cultivation can improve their positions. Moreover less isolated villages have better off farm opportunities for the inhabitants, which allow them to sustain and re-invest in agriculture. While smallholders may not adopt improved cultivation inputs at the same rate as the big landholders, they too have gained from improved yields. Thus Attwood concludes that rural poverty was alleviated by commercialization of agriculture but aggravated due to other reasons such as lack of communication, infrastructure like irrigation and absence of industrial employment. While the Borasambar village situation presents some similarities with Attwood's argument, the important difference was that gains made by farmers under commercialization was differentially experienced and distributed and this would continue till large farmers like the marginal farmers persisted in reinvesting their much larger non-farm incomes into agriculture. The benefits obtained by the poorer people under this situation is likely to be only a relative gain from what they had in the past rather than necessarily the end of poverty or hunger.

Chapter 6: 'Being Hungry': Memories and Politics of Doing with Less

Reports of hunger deaths from western Orissa began from a pioneering newspaper campaign in the 1980s, making this region that is an area comprising of six administrative districts into an image of famine. Critical analysis of the media reports from 1985-86 pointed out the glaring inaccuracies and sensationalist style that departed from the situation on ground and reinforced existing stereotypes about tribal people (Sainath 1996). But hunger death incidents are more than media assisted myths that 'emptied reality' (Barthes 1973). Hunger constitutes a drastic indicator of poverty in a world where food supply is in general plentiful. The calorific count based on food consumption can indicate deprivation that manifests as a biological shortfall leading to debilitation and death. Focus on hunger directs attention to the deep inequalities that restrict or prevent particular people or groups to access food for a large part of their existence and is an issue of immense ethical and political implication. Reported incidents of hunger deaths in Borasambar villages indicate catastrophic deprivation that affected people when they were excluded from existing social networks of credit and exchange due to age, disability and/or strict application of caste and gender rules in the context of endemic poverty.

The objective of this chapter is to explore and analyse the experiences and conceptions of hunger in rural western Orissa. The aim here is to analyse the 'lived realities of people who experience food stress (Pottier 1999:16) in conjunction with historically shifting cultural assumptions about food. Hunger is underpinned not just by the scarcity of food but also assumptions about kinds of food consumed by people in the past and greater awareness of entitlement through participation in state anti-hunger campaigns. Expressions and practises around food provide an understanding of how people live with the seasonal, catastrophic and undisclosed hunger that is persistently present in the village society.

Anthropological research describes how people constructed and realise their social memories and identities through food (Mintz and DuBois 2002) and how food acts as mediums of social, economic and cultural power (Harriss 1982:21). Often the

symbolic importance of food is realised through its consumption and control by economically powerful elites while stories of subordinate groups are riddled by accounts of loss or theft of important grains (Greenough 1982, 1983, Spencer 1990, Ohnuki-Tierney 1995, Elwin 1986[1939]) and consumption of inferior food associated with famine and destitution (Arnold 1988, Thompson 1971). Preoccupation with the symbolic aspects of food however should not result in the neglect of prevalence of real hunger (Scheper-Hughes 1992). In research about rural people seasonal hunger has been a frequent subject of discussion. The focus of such scholarship has been on highlighting the coping strategies that suggest both resilience and agency. Less has been said about the taken for granted nature of such hardship and how the adjustments that village people make stem from their practical and historical experience of 'doing with less' and 'knowing their place' and the fact that such abilities to survive also lead to severe debilitations and premature deaths in many families. As Sen (1982) has argued, hunger was also a biological phenomenon that resulted from failure of entitlement relations that governed the possession and exchange of food in a particular social context. Range of practises that can be described as 'coping' including traditional forms of reciprocities and exploitative arrangements also indicates long term severe shortages, inequities in the local society and social attitudes of people accustomed to survive on very little. The point here is to examine the interconnected social realities of food assumptions, exchanges and entitlements, in order to provide insight into the pattern of inequalities in the consumption of food in forest villages from where, incidents of death due to hunger are reported frequently.

6.1 Hunger was in the Past

'Eating puffed millets in the month of Bhudo (Autumn) is like locking a broken house.'

It was during a conversation with an elderly man (age range 60-70 years) in the Haldiya Teli community that I first heard the term *durbhikhya* (famine) mentioned in Mahulkonda. I had been simply asking about agricultural drought years he had witnessed and its effects on families. He had dismissed my question entirely and had started telling me about the 1900 famine that is called 'chappan saal'. He recalled it

as the year when the 'sarkari kota' or government irrigation tank had been built in a neighbouring village and how bhukhi khana (hunger food) was provided in a relief camps. Desperately hungry women, he told me, would visit that camp clutching their dead children, hoping they would get a second share of food. 'Now that was hunger'. In the past they had famines, people knew real poverty because shetebele loke bhukhe moruthile (in those days people were dying of hunger)'. Mahulkonda people were careful to situate hunger in the narratives of the past, of other times and other places, carefully avoiding the mention of hunger experiences of their own families.

Village people said that in the past the poor were those who rarely ate rice. Through the summer they ate dried mahul flowers and konda (tubers). After the autumn harvest of their fields they would eat kudo (millet). The millet growers epitomised impoverished people who lacked access to fertile rice growing land and despite its ritual significance for the Binjhals, kudo was described as an inferior grain compared to Rice. Moreover it was only through rice that one could enter into barter or exchanges of food and credit with others. Hunger of the past is closely associated with eating insufficiently and consuming symbolically inferior food. With great sarcasm people would say that they had competed with bears over lily roots that grew in the mud at the bottom of the tank.

Many incidents and practises are mentioned to buttress the memories of past hunger such as the theft of grains from the threshing floor, pilferage of standing crops on outlying fields, eating unripe or rain-spoilt grains and digging field rat burrows for rice. There was no counting the number of houses that went hungry on a regular basis. At mealtimes many people would simply bar their doors and stay inside their houses. Standing crops were often stolen from the khet (field) and harvested ones from the threshing sites in the khala (barn). Stories about small and individual acts of desperation and experiences of family suffering are intertwined with the discourse of great poverty of people who lived in remote forest areas. Hunger in those times, they said, had weakened their elders physically and made them abject and dependent. With reference to these memories and experiences of the recent past, present hardships are viewed as bearable.

Hunger is also linked to the past through stories about specific eating and food practises. In the past people had depended greatly on gathered products such as fruit and root especially in the lean season rather than on cultivated grains. Even twenty years ago, it was common for many people to live entirely on a diet of mahul in the rain months from the flowers they had collected, dried and stored securely in summer. The small straw baskets (puda) of mahul that constituted the reserves of poor people and farmers are compared with the huge grain filled ones of the sahlukars. It is said that the clever and far-sighted sahlukars would also keep stocks of dried Mahul to pay wages to people desperate for food and work in the difficult rain months. In an oft-repeated general story of privation, poor people are described as those who would boil a small amount of rice tied in the corner of a cloth and drink the resulting soup (thir). A Binjhal woman told me how in a particularly difficult year, she and her sister had gathered the seeds of wild rice, (jhoer and jhipa) growing by the side of the village tanks that watered the gountia's bhogra. Other women had told me about the collection of konda from the village tank and the forest, many of which would have to be washed, dried, pulverized and treated, to rid them of poisonous qualities and bitter taste. Hunger of village families forms the commonest subject of venomous village gossip. I was often told that so and so family who gave themselves airs were as hungry as the poorest villager in the recent past.

Stories about past hunger contain indignant commentaries about the stark inequalities between the rich and the poor. People said that they had been willing to work for anything in the past. They would satisfy their hunger with a little thir-pan (water in which rice had been boiled) and go on working. It was hunger that made them work for days in the sahlukar's fields, gardens and houses without break only to earn a tambu of paddy (750 gm). The paddy would be brought home, laboriously processed: boiled, dried and pounded in dhenki before it could be cooked and eaten. People died early and frequently of no apparent reason. The standing joke in Mahulkonda was that I would not find very many old people in their village. In many family stories from labouring families, elderly men and women had died the day they had brought a harvest home. Deaths were especially common at the end of summer. With the coming of the rains people who had starved themselves through the summer and worked in the peak agricultural season on their curtailed diets were weakened. Even in 2003, such deaths were attributed to long-term hunger.

The wealth and power of the sahuakar families, described in the last chapter was greatly amplified in this context of destitution. Mahulkonda people remember with some anger, their acute dependence on a handful of wealthy cultivators. When agricultural work was at its peak, most praja would have long exhausted their grain stores. Some sahuakars had used a specially made small ada or tambi (brass measuring vessel used in the village for all kinds of transactions) for paying wages to the agricultural workers (bhutiyars). Malati, a Binjhal woman told me how her mother and other women in her family after transplanting rice (palla rua) and weeding the rice fields (lota ghicha) for the Brahman sahuakars would get paid in mahul flowers. In one particular year, a Brahman sahuakar family had paid bhuti (wages) with arsa pitha (fried sweets made from rice) left over from their marriage feast. Erstwhile sahuakar families had supported these observations though in a more nostalgic vein about how easy it was to get people to work in the past, how hard working they were and how they would perform endless tasks on demand, just for a little water from the pot of boiled rice. As anthropologists have often remarked the transactions around cooked food or food grains define the relative position of groups and individuals within a social order. By opting out of relations and exchanges within their recognized community that suggest inferiority, erstwhile impoverished village people declared their new sense of social standing.

All praja families and not just the very impoverished ones have mentioned the practise of eating mahul flowers in the rain months, though not always describing this practise in terms of hunger. Farming families have also described the deliciously sweet taste and invigorating properties of mahul flowers, cooked with beans, fried with garlic or made into sweets. But such nostalgic memories are laced by the shameful social memories of collective hunger. In 2003, I saw Mahulkonda children playing many games that involved collecting, trapping and hunting. In the month of Sraban they would collect the hard green unripe fruit of the kendu tree (Indian Ebony,) and scrub out the kernels, which after elaborate cleaning and repeated washing in water are eaten. The pungent tasting fruit looked like fat rice-grains and people called it bhat-kendu (rice-Kendu). Another time, at the end of the paddy harvest, I saw children hunting field mice in the bahal fields with some indulgent help from the adult men. In mahul season, they chased and caught monitor lizards in the

forest. Adults no longer participate in such practises; these they said were no more than children's games at present but in the past these were the meagre life support sources to live with and despite hunger till the next harvest or the next wage.

6.2 Forest Fruit and Cultivated Crops: Shifting assumptions about Food

Boundaries between villages were marked by tree corridor, overgrown patches of village forests mingling with tree covered uplands privately owned. Women's conversation with me as we walked to neighbouring villages adjoining Mahulkonda were often peppered with tales about the trees we encountered on the way, about spirits and ancestors intertwined with more material concerns, such as who owned which trees, which were looked like they were dying in drought, who had sold their trees, who were in the process of cutting trees to make a rice field, which trees were bearing fruit. Many stories indicate how people valued forest foods but always longed for rice, the rare food of the rich.

On our way to Sahajpadar from Mahulkonda, half way down the narrow path, my companion an elderly Kultha woman had pointed out to me, a bent dumer (fig tree). She had said that we must stop there to juhar (bow our heads in respect) or else the dumer rani (queen of the fig tree) 'could block your way and not allow you to pass'. She told me a story associated with the tree that goes like this:

'Once a group of children were going to their mamu-ghar (maternal uncle's house). On their way down that very road they had seen the fig tree full of fruit and the ground beneath was spread with ripe fruit fall. Although they had travelled long and were hungry, they didn't want to waste time eating wild figs, since they were going to their mamu-ghar where they would eat bhat (rice). But when they reached their mamu-ghar there was not a single grain of rice there. They were so hungry by then, that they almost tasted the ripe juicy fig they had left behind and their mouth watered. They had hurried back. But when they reached the tree, the figs had mysteriously disappeared and since that day people remember to say 'juhar ma Dumer rani' when they pass that way.'

Such stories served to remind people of the consequences of disregarding forest food and also describe their fears around the scarcity and loss of the staple food rice. The struggle to organise a basic village meal was common to many households in 2002. I spent many mornings talking with women as they hurriedly put together the mid-morning meal. Sometimes we would converse about food and most days I observed what was being cooked. I was invited to many meals, took part in numerous conversations over food, cooking and eating with several families. Being allowed to cook or even come close to the family hearth (hari-shal) was a special gesture of friendship since it was seldom allowed to non-jati people while refusal to accept invitations gave offence. Was I practising caste-discrimination (byaj), women would often challenge me? And was such behaviour appropriate for a sarkari person, they would joke?

Except for feast times, meals were intensely private affairs involving only the immediate family members. No one looked on and not even wandering children were invited. Most everyday meals were frugal. Small cultivators and wageworker families appeared to live only on rice and shop bought sugar. Forest fruit, greens collected from the commons and hunted game, valued for their special tastes, qualities and sociality, were scarce. Except for the wealthier farming families who have a range of fields, very few families could obtain seasonal produce from their home gardens or fields. In poorer household the products from the forests were bartered and sold for cash and rice was purchased.⁸⁴ Forest products have also become scarce with the trend of converting uplands and grazing area (gochar) into rice fields and extensions of house sites into home gardens. While itinerant traders brought expensive fish and vegetables to sell in Mahulkonda, only the new sahuakar households could afford to buy these luxuries. Among the food that people remember most nostalgically were char-khauja and mahul-khauja, sweets made by cooking char berries or dried mahul flowers with brown sugar. Char (Chironji seeds), mahul and other kinds of fruit like kendu, custard apple and mangoes have a market and are mainly sold rather than consumed.

⁸⁴ In their work on Zambia, Moore and Vaughan (1994:188), traced how over a period of time peoples' diets had become deficient in 'bush meat and fish' and 'relish crops' which had become high cash and barter value products

The meals I had witnessed in impoverished primarily wage working households were meagre affairs consisting of (pokhal) rice-in-water, salt, one or two roasted tomatoes or a single raw onion with rock salt and some chillies. When available such food would be laced with gathered greens, flowers, seeds, small game, pickled bamboo shoots, shell fish and shrimps, seasonally and depending on the family's ability to access such resources. Women bought the tiny dried shrimps, garlic, onions, oil and a few tomatoes from the women (kuchni) traders, for the evening meal. For snack to carry during forest trips and for breakfast they would buy small amounts of puffed rice from the village confectioners (Keunt) families. In the peak agricultural season I saw Binjhal women heading out for an entire mornings rice transplantation work after drinking the dark, highly sweetened tea and a few handfuls of puffed rice. The sugar in the tea, I was told by many Binjhal women, gave them the 'strength' to complete the regular morning chores of fetching firewood and bear up to the rigour of transplantation work during the rains. Sugar is an important component of the diet of poor families and well stocked by the village shops. In wage labour dominated households, nothing was stored, except a sack or two of rice. Universality of rice eating has also resulted in an inversion of previous practices such that richer people consumed more vegetables and meats and less rice while poorer people ate mostly rice. Meat, eggs and fish and even pulses were rare in the diets of impoverished people. Wealthier villagers often bought fish, eggs and vegetables from cyclist peddlers who visited Mahulkonda. Poorer people purchased their much smaller items from women barter traders or village shops were seasonal wage migrants were given limited credit.

Meals in farming households that had access to upland fields and who farmed their home gardens were also frugal but more diverse. Through the rain months, they would eat a variety of snacks obtained from the home garden, boiled or roasted maize, steamed pods of pulses and roasted seeds of semi (a kind of runner beans). They would also cook tomatoes, brinjal, okra and chillies, pumpkins and ash gourds obtained from their home garden and vegetables like a number of gourds and paddy straw mushrooms (poal chatti) that grew in their khala in the fields. They would also glean a variety of greens from the upland field that grew mixed with the pulses and cook the tender leaves of drumstick and kachnar trees. Vegetables cooked in sour butter milk, mushrooms cooked with garlic and mustard, upland greens cooked with

peanut paste, neem flowers cooked with tomatoes and kuler leaves with a little milk, bean seeds were boiled and cooked in all sorts of ways, doves (panka) and shell-fish wrapped in leaves were roasted and green mahul seeds were fried into chips. Kultha women were especially adept in preparing and processing a variety of vegetables. In many households in winter, I saw them at work shredding tender shoots of kordi (bamboo) that is made into hedua, a local delicacy of dried and fermented kordi. Many women also made konkharu baris by mixing grated ash gourd with a paste of pulses and drying them in the sun. Some Kultha women also knew how to smoke fish to keep it for later consumption. This processed food could be stored and later eaten as an accompaniment to the bland rice. In the past, women remembered their mothers taking these products from village to village to barter-trade them with forest produce like mahul flowers or seeds. Some high demand processed food like hedua was sold to cyclist traders but some was also consumed at home. Many kinds of sweets were made from rice and sugar during harvest festival, feast days like Push Punni (harvest festival in January) and as sending away gifts to daughters. The practise of making rice sweets at least on the occasion of Push Punni has become prevalent even among poorer villagers.

Many village people also raised flocks of goat as small capital but slaughtering of these animals for food was rare and viewed as a great extravagance. Binjhal families always kept chickens that were slaughtered on special occasions during ceremonies, when guests came unexpectedly or to tempt sick children. Goats were used for ritual sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions such as when married daughters from the village had their first child. On such occasions the meat was cleaned and cooked in the open at the sacred grove itself and shared out between men. Village women were forbidden to eat the meat offerings at the gudi because it was believed that it would make them infertile. When one of the village goats had to be slaughtered for secular purposes, a list was drawn out at first with the names of the family and the amount of meat they would take. Only after all the families had paid money and portions have been accounted for would the animal be slaughtered. Eating meat was very rare. In western Orissa of the past meat was obtained as game through hunting times and meat is still referred to 'shikar'. Older villagers remembered the plentiful shikar that was available in the past. People hunted wild boars in the summer, like they still do in forest villages. Older people never tired of telling me how, once,

thirtysix boars had fallen into a trap set by the villagers near the kota. One elderly keunt man had described the thrill of chasing and catching rabbits in the village forest. Spread of cultivation had ended hunting and the food practises associated with it. Fishing practises have been affected through depletion of forests and proliferation of small dams on hill streams. An elderly keunt man told me how before the dam in Ghucepalli was built, in good years schools of fish used to come swimming in the village bahal fields. The main tank in Mahulkonda and many neighbouring villages in summer were under fishing contracts that had to be purchased from the panchayat. Fishing in the tank was restricted to those who had purchased the contract and who would harvest the fish in summer for commercial purposes. In 2003, the Binjhal old gountia jama, in a rare show of solidarity had jointly purchased the fishing contract from the panchayat. Not only were the earnings from the fish harvest in summer divided among all the families, but the day the harvest took place was celebrated like a rare feast day in summer when fish accompanied the usual rice in the impoverished families and some of their ritual friends.

The understanding of village food practises would remain incomplete without a discussion about drinking. The small yellow flowers of the mahul were also used for brewing liquor. The practise of drinking the liquor made from mahul was one way in which village people distinguished between the hard working farmers and the drunken forest dependent adivasi. This association has affected the way in which drinking is viewed in the local society. Often loss of land and poverty of jati groups such as the Binjhals and the Saonras are attributed to their love of drinking. Despite the near universal bias against alcohol, drinking on social, religious and ceremonial occasions has not disappeared from the village. Not to be able to offer some liquor and chicken to the affinal relative (kunua) is considered a serious breach of hospitality and loss of face among the Binjhals. Village people were serious propagators of the virtues of temperance, but this had only driven drinking underground. Mahulkonda had a licensed liquor shop that had a steady and secular clientele as could be seen from the crowd on the dark pirha at nightfall. Village women often remarked scornfully that the best produce from the fields, forests and water found their way to that shop. What had declined, everyone admitted, was the practise of 'mahul rondha' or making liquor from Mahul in home stills. One of the

reasons for this was a repeated raid by the excise police. Several Saonra and Binjhal families who had made liquor at home in the past had suffered imprisonment and were still paying for expensive litigation.

Drinking has also declined especially among Binjhal women. Many of them recalled how mahul liquor had eased the pain of their aching limbs after a hard day's transplantation work in the sahuksar's wet rice fields. Binjhals associate their humiliation by other jati groups on their drinking habits and try to reduce their consumption. Women especially make do with very sweet dark tea at present. Many Binjhal had sarcastically remarked that drinking alcohol was on the rise among the cultivator jati and Brahman and that if alcohol had been as expensive in the past as it is now, the poor Binjhal and Saonra people would have died of thirst. Poorer people highlighted the drinking habits of the wealthier men from erstwhile temperate jati to demonstrate their debasement at present.

People were clearly what they ate and it was believed that certain kinds of food were appropriate to certain social status. I was made to recount often and frequently about what I had eaten that day and whether pulses, vegetables, fish or meat had accompanied the rice as any rich person's (thila loko) meal rightly should. On hearing that I had eaten chips made of tol chhal (green Mahul seed) or fried munga saag, roasted salt fish or boiled semi bihan (beans) with rice, they always clicked their tongues in disapproval. For people willing to pay there were no barriers to lead the rich peoples' life of eating two meals comprising of rice, pulses, vegetables, fish or meat. But as the summer of 2003 progressed, it was clear that it was far more difficult to obtain and organise the deficient and truncated diet of poor people.

6.3 Unremarked Seasonal distress

The 2003 summer in Mahulkonda was vicious, following after an agricultural drought season when paddy yields had been reduced to a quarter of the usual. It was a difficult time, when forgotten disputes were raked up and allegations of betrayal and abandonments were the subject of village gossip. As the mahul and mango trees drooped in the heat and the tank water turned a poisonous green in colour, portentous stories did rounds of the village: somewhere monkeys were falling off the

trees, dead from thirst - elsewhere it was raining dead birds, cocks were sacrificed and gunias summoned to tame restless spirits. Men went everywhere to work at government wage for projects that were being opened all over the panchayat. In the evenings the gaan khoul, buzzed with urgency as distraught women looked for rice before preparing the evening meal. Many women had remarked tersely, *'paddy wasn't going too far this year. In a modudi (drought) year it's mostly husk'*.

Village people especially women appeared to have visibly shrunk that summer. 'Were you unwell these last days?' I had asked Bui, a tall and big-framed Binjhal woman. 'We'll all dry up now, you'll see', she had said with her usual broad grin. 'Don't look so worried, it is not like this always', she had hastened to add. 'It is just this year that we are feeling the pinch. No rain, no harvest, where is the rice to hold us all-together?' One of the Kallar families had an especially harrowing time that year. The head of the household had died suddenly the year before, just when the agricultural season was starting. The remaining family of three had not been able to sow paddy. By summer, they had difficulty obtaining rice for their daily meals. Village shops refused them credit because there weren't any wage earners in that family. Eventually the elder boy, who was sixteen, had found work in a village house-building site. Summer was the time when better off cultivators and those in salaried employment built new brick-cement houses, enlarged their wells or started work to level newly acquired uplands. The Kallar family had been subsisting on the rice they had brought as advance payment for the son's work and what their equally impoverished Binjhal ritual friends could give them. I had asked the Binjhal family where they had found the rice to help their neighbours in such a time, they had told me that it was from the 'BPL' rice: the 16 kg subsidised rice (@ Rs.5.50 per kg) that the government distributed monthly to each below poverty line family through the panchayat. Buying the subsidized rice that came to the panchayat every month was high priority among impoverished families of Mahulkonda.

Borrowing food grains from each other rather than village sahuikars was a preferred form of action. Based on trust, there were strict codes of returning and helping that people seldom violated. People returned the rice that they borrowed from equally situated household as soon as they could. Mandaro, a Binjhal woman whose husband had just finished doing earthwork in a road-building site, had saved Rs.900.

She told me how her husband was planning to visit the roadside village K, in order to buy rice. She felt that they should first return the rice that they had borrowed earlier, before eating any. Her husband had thought they could return the rice later but she thought otherwise and they had a fight over this. 'She couldn't allow that, she said, everyone needs that rice, how can I not give back when I have, who knows about tomorrow.'

The burden was on women to keep the cooking-pot boiling. Prestige conscious men would rather starve than borrow food grains. Farming families without women but small children have suffered in the past through this practise. For instance in Kultha families, where men would not work as farm servants or plough men, it was mostly the women who went asking for small credit of rice from their trusted families or friends. It was not surprising to find women from established praja farming families asking for credit from other equally hard up women. One evening I had met Minoti, a Kultha woman (45 years) asking one of the kuchni trading women (see chapter 9) for a loan of Rs.100 to buy rice. The kuchni-trading women, also belonged to Kultha families, and related to her family. Minoti had said that she needed the money to buy rice and would return it after her husband who had worked in spring at the Kendu-phadi (leaf collection centre) gets his wages and he was going to get at least Rs.400. She had said that she needed some rice as well. Minoti had turned towards me and said that she always came to 'the girls' for the rice, she said, they never failed her. Shanti, one of the women traders had said that she didn't have any money but Minoti got a small basket of rice. The women-traders though not wealthy people always had some rice and cash at the end of the day from things that had sold in exchange for rice in the village. Minoti's plight was particularly discussed in the village, because as a girl she had belonged, to a wealthy sahuakar family. Kultha families were more dependent on their farms and whatever wage work was available in the village, as they mostly would not migrate seasonally for wage work.

Borrowing money from employers as wage advances was more acceptable for men and women. A few days later I witnessed one of the trading women asking for a loan from the Brahman sahuakar's household in whose summer vegetable garden they had been doing wage work. She had needed money to pay the examination fee for her son who was going to appear for 'matric' examination that year. The sahuakar had

insisted that she did not have any money, only paddy. It had appeared in 2003 that the village sahuکار's dwindled grain stores were used only for wage payments, while poorer people were pooling their meagre resources in exchanges with each other.

Village wealthy families made small gains during such seasons. That year I saw a village woman pawning a big bell metal dish, (the kind that women usually bring as dowry when they marry), at a local sahuکار family, because the family did not have the cash needed to buy the 'BPL' rice.⁸⁵ Many women had stopped wearing their gold nose-pins, the commonest and sometimes the only ornament of married women. These were the easiest to pawn against cash at the Naugan marwari. Mahulkonda villagers preferred the marwari than village sahuکارs for pawning gold jewellery. I met many men on their cycles going to the neighbouring village K, where a well-known Kultha sahuکار who pawned articles, lived.

People restricted ceremonial spending when they could but they couldn't they made long term losses. Many marriages were postponed that spring, there were only 5 compared to the 25 the year before. Some poorer families that went through with the marriages of their daughters had a difficult time. Mohano, an elderly man of the Telpida Teli jati told me that as a consequence of the marriage of his youngest daughter in spring they had to sell their plough oxen. They had also brought advance money from the Brahman sahuکار household where his only son worked as a haliya (permanent farm worker). They did this he said to avoid selling their fields, but their farming would suffer next year because of loss of family labour and the plough oxen. Mohano said that they would also have to consume the Paddy that they were storing as seeds. Medical expenses were more difficult to avoid. In another Binjhal family, the sudden illness of their two small children had increased household expenses in summer. Several bell metal utensils had started disappearing from their house. What happened to your gadia (the big water pot)? I had asked

⁸⁵ Out of 270 households in Mahulkona in 2002-03, 158 households were classified as BPL (below poverty line families) families. These families were entitled to subsidized rice from the local panchayat. In 2002-03 this was 16 kg per family per month @ Rs.5.50 per kg. 22 households came under the Antodaya scheme that entitled them to 25 kg of rice per month @ Rs.3 per kg. Following this classification, nearly 68% of the village households were living under the government defined poverty line. In addition to the BPL and Antodaya schemes, a few of the elderly were also entitled to 10 kg of rice per month free of cost. . Most people wanted to have their names on the BPL list and lived in dread of the government surveyor who would detect some glimpse of wealth and categorize their family as APL (above poverty line).

Binodini, a 30-year-old Binjhal woman, when I saw her storing the day's drinking water in a plastic bucket. *'The hospital bill was a thousand and ten rupees, a fortune,'* Binodini had said her eyes widening. *'See our paddy'* she had said pointing to the two large plaited straw baskets in the room, *'one is sold already'*. Her husband said that he was not getting time to deliver it to the man who had bought it. *'The second basket was seed for this season – no money now and no rice at home. We have to be ready now for hard times till the next harvest.'*

I met unlikely people in the village food for work tank-site sponsored by the block development office, and which involved enlarging the small muda (three sided tank) located on the private land of a Brahman sahuakar family (see chapter 8). Since the work did not involve leaving the village, even hard pressed members of respectable cultivator families, went to dig earth as such work is referred to in the village. Hari who was over fifty was exhausted after three days of working. *'I am not as young as I used to be and I am not used to this 'mait-buha' work'*, he said, smiling apologetically. He needed to go because their family rice stock had been exhausted. They had not got even a sheaf of Paddy his wife had told me earlier. There were too many ekshias (birth ceremonies) and kam ghars (funeral ceremonies) to attend this year, he said and no harvest. Throughout the lean season, people followed the price of rice. Almost everyone I spoke to in the village was buying. When the cost of rice per kg reached Rs.8, people feared that it might become Rs.10 per kg by the next harvest time. There was no rice in the village, village shopkeepers were apprehensive of stocking rice, they did not have the capital they would say and they were afraid of people demanding credit. The nearest go-down was 8 km away at the roadside village at K, and people went there frequently. When the BPL rice supply at the panchayat village did not come in the month of Baisakh (May) there was uproar in the village. Later the panchayat secretary was accused of pilferage and briefly suspended and two months supplies were released. This had again resulted in people running to the sahuakars to borrow money, as they did not have the cash to pick up two months supply.

Family decisions about resource use and resulting accusations took familiar and stereotypical routes. Dilo, a farmer of the kultha jati had experienced real hardship in the 2002-03-drought year, due he said to two consecutive years of crop losses. The

year before the drought year an excess of water from the village dam had overflowed into a nalla (stream) skirting his land, resulting in partial submergence of his field. In the drought year, which followed, Dilo's household food stock of rice, moong and biri, was exhausted much before the next harvest. Dilo's recently married son started doing bhuti (agricultural wage-work) at one of the Brahman households and decided to move out with his family consisting of his wife and a year old child. Moving out in Mahulkonda implies cooking at a separate hearth while staying within the old family compound. Dilo, who had always done his own chash and never done bhuti for others or migrated to the canal, lamented his ill fortune, the breaking up of his family and the ingratitude of his son. Throughout the summer Dilo could not find any wage work. Since his other grown-up son was disabled and dependent on him, it was left to his wife, Malati to secretly go searching for rice on credit every day. Malati had told me that she was ashamed to tell her husband, that there was no rice at home, since they have never been in such a situation before. She had blamed her daughter in law rather than the drought for their troubles. Taking the decision to separate hearth groups rather than pooling family resources in difficult years are viewed as selfish and self-serving acts.

The accusations of not feeding the elderly frequently made the rounds in the village and increased a great deal that summer. Old men or women would often complain to other villagers that their sons' families were grudging them even a little rice water. Such complaints were often made to the sahuakar families, who were asked to arbitrate. In many households, elderly fathers ate their meals with one son's household while elderly mothers ate with another son. This food was called khoraki that the adult sons were supposed to provide for their elderly parents once they were all married, living in separate hearth groups and the family land had been partitioned. An elderly Binjhal man had decided to live alone instead of with his sons and had built a tiny house for himself in the agricultural field, while his wife lived with one of their sons. He had kept a field for himself and a small flock of chicken and some goats. Soon his impoverished married daughter and son in law's family had moved in to stay with him. He had said that he did not want to stay with his sons, who grudged him his two meals a day. In summer when his daughter went away for wage work to the 'canal area', he said that his son-in-law was refusing to give him food. Later he

had told me that he had not eaten for two days when his son noticed this and came with food in the night.

'Why would you feed an old cow or a bull?' villagers said sometimes in defence of the errant sons. *'How long would it live and what would you get?'* The old people would mostly agree with such statements saying that, *'of course the sons were right in doing what they did. When there was so much 'anatan' wouldn't they rather feed and look after their children than old bones?'* Three deaths in Mahulkonda were attributed directly by village people to the selfishness of sons. Of the two men and one woman, all of whom were over fifty years old and who died with the onset of monsoon, suddenly and without any apparent illness, two had undergone extreme hardship in the summer months doing wage labour and in none case roaming from village to village as itinerant peddler. The family of the man, who had taken to itinerant peddling at his age, came in for the harshest criticism, as both the son and his wife were well to do government employees, who lived elsewhere. (Three months after my fieldwork, I heard about the sudden deaths of three more apparently healthy older men.) In 2003 summer I first noticed that the Oriya language newspapers were carrying accounts of 'starvation deaths' from villages all over the district.

6.4 Death from Hunger

Reports of hunger deaths have made western Orissa, that is an area that is approximately six administrative districts, into an image of famine. In a pioneering newspaper campaign that began in the 1980s, starvation deaths were reported from the Kalahandi district. The reports had described emaciated adivasi men and women begging the Prime Minister's wife for work, and highlighted the plight of 'Orissa Tribes who lived on Seed and Grass' and 'miserable diet' of the tribal peoples even in non-drought years.⁸⁶ The influential people in the national capital were rediscovering the 'tribal' as indigent and starving. In 1986 the Lok Sabha M.P. from Kalahandi had remarked that Kalahandi should be 'made the national laboratory for poverty eradication'.⁸⁷ Critically analysing the media reporting of the 1985-86 stories

⁸⁶ Indian Express, 26th July 1985, 28th July 1985, 7th August 1985, 23rd August 1985.

of drought in Kalahandi, Sainath (1996) has written about the glaring inaccuracies and sensationalist style of presenting the content that often departed from the real situation in ground and reinforced existing stereotypes about tribal people. According to him, stories that were read most widely in the country, began with sentences like: *'Here is a picture of hell' and would go on to say that all who couldn't get away from Kalahandi were either dead or dying, about how the people who remained, 'moved in groups, licking water like dogs.'* And that, *'for food they pick up the poisonous roots and leaves – only things that will grow there'* (1996:337). Reporting hunger deaths have become more common in subsequent decades and many more regions in Orissa and elsewhere in the country. Such media reports tend to turn complex stories based in real events into 'cultural image of victimization' (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996: 10).⁸⁸ Despite its stereotypical, limited approach and the presentation of demeaning, primordial images of abjection and victimhood that submerged complex realities and belittled peoples' agency, media reports also raised important questions about administrative apathy, state responsibility and citizen's rights and entitlement. Most importantly, they helped to make poverty an unusual, unjustified phenomenon that requires examination and action. The specific uses that people make of this space opened up by the discourse of anti-hunger campaigning and legislation enables them to discuss and problematize poverty. However newspaper reports are limited in their representations from which vital perspectives are missing and hence provide little understanding of the social realities that constitute and produce local meanings and claims around incidents of 'hunger deaths'. My point in presenting the complexities of a 'hunger death' incident reported in the press is to reveal the intricate world of local interests and claims, that enables us to better

⁸⁷ Pattnaik J, Kalahandi Lok Sabha M.P, Lok Sabha Debates, Vol XIII, No.10, 6th March 1986, pp. 409-410 cited in Currie B 2000:137

⁸⁸ In 2001 a series of newspaper reports and television coverage again brought the focus back on Orissa and hunger. Summoning the spectre of starvation deaths in several parts of the country and especially Orissa, the Opposition accused the government of being insensitive to human suffering. Referring to The Times of India news item about tribals consuming mango seed kernel to fight starvation in Orissa, members across party lines expressed concern over the situation. The state opposition leader remarked that 'if people are eating cattle food 54 years after independence, who else other than the government will be blamed'? It was a shame that the world's largest democracy faced hunger, an indefensible situation made many times worse by the paradox of its overflowing granaries. In the middle of this counter exchange of denials and admissions, the current Chief Minister tentatively ventured the remark that the 'tribals were eating their traditional food'. (Times News Network, 2001, Times of India. September 3a, 2001, TOI, September 3b, 2001, TOI, September 14 2001, The Hindu, Monday November 18, 2002, editorial) This wasn't an especially new tack since in 1986, after the 'child sale' story exploded in national media the cornered chief minister had tried to imply that the 'sale of children was a tradition in Western Orissa' (Sainath 1996: 326).

understand not just particular ways in which dearth is experienced and expressed but also the ways in which such state support is directed towards those who were perceived as the most distressed and bereft of support within the local society.

In 2003 drought year, I noticed a report of a hunger death in a local Oriya language new paper that was delivered in Mahulkonda everyday.⁸⁹ I decided to follow the story that was from a village, 25 km away from Mahulkonda. It was a village I had visited before and was slightly familiar with. Village C was surrounded by hills; the hillsides covered with forests, much of it under state reservation. Forested villages like C were considered to be very poor due to the absence of fertile cultivable land. C was a village where two jati groups predominated, the Binjhals and the Telpida Teli, the oil-presser community. Though a Binjhal dominant village, the latter community had greater share of the limited fertile land. C was famous for its forests, hunting practises, distinctly anti-brahmanical feelings. The most famous story from the village was that of the bandit Bakhria Singh, who with his armed supporters had raided villages of Borasambar and Patna during 1899-1900 famines. Mahulkonda Binjhal families had marriage connections with families in this village. During my visit to C I spoke briefly to the concerned family and in greater detail with village people about the incident reported in the newspaper and the following accounts are based on those conversations.

The old man pointed out Mayadharo Bariha's house to me. 'Go, on, don't hesitate'. He said to me, 'she must be at home. Take a few shots with your camera while you are there.' So, I went there, attracting a great deal of attention, a large group of men, women and children following us. It was a tiny two room rui-mera hut with thatch, next doors to a brick and cement house. The single room, which was also, a kitchen had cooking vessels strewn all around. Mayadharo's widowed daughter in law was oiling and combing her daughter's hair. 'Come out' they said to her loudly. 'Bring out the cot and put it right here in the shade.' For a moment there was chaos in that narrow yard. 'Come out', they urged her, 'someone has come to see you.' She came out and sat on the cot, still half holding, half carrying her little girl and the oil bottle,

⁸⁹ Samaj. Sambalpur.2003, 22nd April.

comb and mirror. I asked her if it was true, about what had come in the papers about the old man, her father in law starving to death. She said without hesitation that of course it was true. She said she had done whatever she could for the old man. She didn't have any work herself, so she couldn't do more. 'Yes, the BDO had come with some rice and money but it was too late. He said he would come again but he hasn't so far. I don't have any land. I went for Kendu leaf picking (pattar tula) for a few days. It is over now and I am at home. If I went to the canal who would look after my child?' One of the men sitting on the pirha remarked, 'the old man died of hunger, the government (sarkar) didn't lift a finger to help.' 'Couldn't you or the village people have helped him?' I asked the man. He seemed taken aback and remarked more softly. 'We did help as long as it was possible – we have our own families (kutumb) to look after'. 'Why don't you go and speak to the BDO again? Won't the village people help you with that?' I asked her. 'They help?' She snorted. 'They'll eat (khybe) that's what they know best, if some money came this way, they'll swipe some of it, that's all they are worth. I don't need their help. My papers have gone up to higher officials; I am waiting for that money. It has been three years now.' 'What money is this?' I asked her. 'Don't you know that the sarkar gives Rs.10000 to the next of kin of the person who dies of hunger? I am waiting for my husband's money he died of hunger too. You tell the officers, if you meet them, about my case.' (Field-notes May 2003)

We had sat talking for a while with the host family and where some elderly Binjhal men had gathered, most I was told were away in the dongar on a chase. Our host family were middle farmers who had been affected by drought but who were managing to get by through their summer vegetable cultivation. By now I was getting used to the reluctance of people to discuss food scarcity on personal terms. I had asked the gathered people about the 55 years old Binjhal man whose 'starvation death' the newspaper had reported. It was the women of the house, characteristically, who had replied that, it was true and it can be said that he had died of hunger. My host family had known him, as he had once worked in their house as a farm servant. The women said that they had given him rice as long as he had the strength to come and ask for it and because of their old relationship they owed him that. But he was sick and weakened by tuberculosis and had stopped coming and may have died of hunger in the end.

The Binjhal men had revealed the other aspects of the victim's life. The dead Binjhal man's son had married a woman of the Telpida Teli jati. The family was therefore not greatly favoured either by the Binjhals or the marginally better-off Teli people in the village. Two years ago the son had died of tuberculosis and in 2003 the old man had died leaving the daughter in law and one child. The severe ostracism that they faced in the village was revealed by the disclosure that when the old man had died, village people would not come to help the daughter in law to bury him. In the end she had dragged his body to the field and covered it with brush. They had wondered how she had the strength to do it. Somebody had informed the block development officer. *'Later when the BDO and the Zilla parishad chairman came to the village, they were very angry at our behaviour and told us that at least we should have dug a pit for the old man and buried him decently. The BDO gave her rice and money and promised to do more.'* They said that when the government person arrived in the village he had severely reprimanded villagers for their cruelty and barbarism. Transgressing the conventions of jati appeared to have been dangerous or life threatening in this case cutting one off from the meagre credit lines and support networks that village people had to offer to each other. But the incident also underscores the fact that among the impoverished, the elderly and those with physically debilitating illness were most likely to meet an early and lonely end. It is also such abject people whose stories get reported to the panchayat or the block office as truly deserving of state attention. Under the circumstances where neither the Binjhal nor the Teli community was willing to relent, the state administration is considered to be the appropriate arbitrator and patron of the most marginalized.

One of the factors that I found significant in this incident as well as similar ones that were recounted to me by Mahulkonda villagers was that, the case for 'state assistance' was made out only where the person is believed to be truly in hardship and bereft of all forms of support. In the local assessment of destitution, the widowed woman with a small child from an impoverished family, whose male earning members have perished is viewed as deserving of state support. However villagers who had witnessed the event did not see the death of the old man as unusual or interpreted either as the failure of the community or the state. Such deaths were too common to be remarkable and physical or moral failings of the men were usually

cited as causes. Usually moral failure of sons to look after aged parents or transgressions of caste rules is given as the main cause. At the same time, people believe that the state was responsible for the general well being of people and considered it their legitimate right to ask for such assistance in such cases. The route to state assistance was strictly controlled by village elite and politically aspirant individuals.

Relationship with influential people in the village was a significant factor in obtaining welfare assistance from the government since they acted as the gatekeepers to state resources. Often there were undisclosed favours that would be given or taken. I later came to know that in Mahulkonda there had been several such incidents in the recent past. Some were considered deserving while other termed fake. When Phulo's husband died and she was left alone with her small daughter, influential village people had helped her to write an application to the government making a case for hunger death. Although belonging to the old gountia family, Phulo's husband was very poor and had lived most of his life working as a farm servant for the new gountia's family. It was unlikely that Phulo could have received any support from her husband's kin or her natal kin, who were very poor. For a widow to inherit a husband's land is viewed as illegitimate by the latter's brothers who consider themselves as the rightful heirs. Such beliefs work against extending support to young widowed women by their husband's kin. In village reckoning, widows with very young children were the 'deserving poor'. However the decisions to help them to approach the state were perhaps never completely altruistic and not apart from village micro-politics. For instance, it was rumoured in the village that Phulo's husband had helped the new gountia's family to regularise the legal ownership of the village sir land during the last land settlement when land disputes were being arbitrated (see chapter 5). While this made him highly unpopular among his own kin, it may have given his widow some leverage with important people in the village. Similarly when a Goud man had died in early 2002, and left behind his wife and five small children, village notables had petitioned the government for assistance under 'hunger death'. The MLA had come to the village and they said that they had made a big fuss about it. They had argued cynically that while the family was best rid of the man who was a drunk and did not do a day's hard work, the poor widow could not possibly do wage work with so many small children and that they were doing very

badly. This family too had some fields but in 2002, there were no men in the family to cultivate it, their house was decrepit and breaking down every day. Villagers believed that the widowed woman and the children were helpless enough to deserve state assistance. Mahulkonda's primary school principal told me that it was increasingly difficult to get the government to agree to hunger deaths since it reflected badly on them and all those big people stand to lose their jobs. And that is why they wanted to do gruesome things like tearing a person open to see if they had eaten anything the night before. After their concerted efforts they had only managed to get a BPL card and a new government scheme house for the Goud woman, the promised money had not come. I had asked him whether he had read the incident in village C. He had said that he had and that it was difficult to help people who lived in jhar- dongar places, by the time the word gets out they are already dead. The retrospective nature of the assistance implies that someone had to die for the state to extend help after assessing the survivors' chances of meeting the same fate.

6.5 Conclusion

Hunger experienced at present is ubiquitous and silent, too commonplace to merit discussion. The past on the other hand provides an acceptable frame to discuss hunger without compromising family status through shameful confessions. In western Orissa villages changing food practises enable a local discourse where 'being hungry' acts as a metaphor of the past. These interpretations are based on what people eat now as against what they consumed in the past based on values attached to kinds of food consumed and kinds of people they were. While people articulate a sense of increased wellbeing derived from their reduced dependence on forest or foraged foods, their lived realities reveal continuous struggle to obtain staple food grains not simply through their inability to farm as in the past but also through their lack of purchasing power. I look at some of the methods of obtaining food that involve social networks and state subsidized food and the catastrophic consequences of being unable to access these sources for impoverished people. A great number of people are perpetually at risk. In western Orissa broader discourses such as the politicization of hunger through the anti-hunger campaign interact with local experiences in complex ways. Political activism that highlights incidents of

hunger death provides insight into the various interested actors in the locality who use these as proofs of regional poverty to attract state welfare resources or build a political following. But such incidents also point out the glaring incapacities of the rural social relations of reciprocities that not only sift out the most destitute but also tend to attribute moral responsibility of the disaster to the victims themselves.

Apart from their preoccupation with hunger of the past and denial of present hardship, village people were involved in political interchange with the state's anti-hunger interventions. Strict gate keeping meant that it was only the most deprived and destitute who would request or would be permitted to access the meagre resources that were obtainable only on the death of a person by hunger. The activation of local government's anti-hunger intervention revealed the circumstances and characteristics of severe deprivation in rural western Orissa. I argue that the increasing familiarity and engagement with state discourses and realization of entitlements as citizens affects the taken for granted nature of poverty and threshold of acceptable hunger. While that allows certain forms of discussions to appear by problematizing hunger, it does not necessarily transform the social conditions of acute deprivation.

Chapter 7: 'Becoming Free': Dependence, Mobility and Rural Wage Work

In the previous chapters I have shown how expansion of farming and conception of hunger form the broad frameworks through which Binjhal and other villagers map their changing status and wellbeing. For Mahulkonda villagers, one of the distinguishing features of the past poverty was the work people did for wealthy farmers through haliya, guti and kuthia, arrangements. Based on grain wage rates that were practically unchanged since the early twentieth century, permanent farm work was a sought after livelihood by impoverished social groups and people in the past. Villagers' accounts of labouring identify the greatest crisis of existence experienced within their lifetime with the time when such forms of work became unavailable. It was only with the expansion of irrigation and increasing productivity of regional farming and improved means of communication that impoverished villagers, regained access to an assortment of wage labour options by combining seasonal migration with local farm work. The objective of this chapter is to examine the social experiences of rural livelihoods that involved wage labour. Mahulkonda villagers assessed the improvement in their lives from the perceived changes in their experiences and understandings of farm labouring roles of the past and present and expressed these through the discourses of servitude and freedom. The point is to understand the relationship between livelihoods, identity perceptions and aspirations, as well as the connections between economic compulsions and social position that underpinned the choices and constituted the small 'victories' of impoverished villagers.

While villagers' identities as labouring people have become more concrete, and they continued to struggle to earn subsistence standard living, they no longer viewed as legitimate the facts of labouring under perpetual compulsions of hunger, facing the inevitable deprivations associated with certain stages of life, positions in the social hierarchy or times in the agrarian season. These points of views have been shaped by the marginal expansion in their repertoire of assorted livelihoods. Though chances of maintaining small farms and gaining bargaining power against local employers, bettering their social positions remains firmly determined by as before not

on the choices they make but on the conditions and requirements of their rural employers and the needs of the labour market, village people perceive these as having emerged from their agency and initiative. Descriptions of migrating to the canal under desperate hunger and labouring through decades to support their families attribute a great deal of agency to labouring men. Freedom here is equated not with any single factor such as increasing wages or livelihood choices but situated within the broader objective of becoming more rooted and respectable through gaining landed status in the local social world and escaping the coercive control of the local sahuikars. In this narrative, public welfare expenditure, despite its many flaws, served for them as an indicator of state recognition of both their agency as well as their plight.

That sahuikars and big farmers too have been enervated from public expenditure, development projects promoting irrigation and improved communication, does not take away from the positive interpretations of recent changes by labouring people. Expansion of labouring choices has not been accompanied by the replication of the overwhelming nature of past dependence based on a single source of livelihood and disproportionate powers of a few employers. Diminishing power of the sahuikars and fragmentation among them, the presence of many small sahuikars competing for local labour rather than a few powerful ones captivating them, indicated for villagers, the small victories earned by them. Indeed it can be argued that farm labouring, with its connotations of low prestige and hunger, have lost its self-evident nature, cut to size through its insertion within and subjection to competition from a range of other labouring options. At the same time reappearing in a more secular way, local farm work continues to serve its limited purpose for poorer villagers, enabling them to distribute and maximise their labouring energies, negotiate with other employers in migrant destinations; remain connected with their meaningful social world and re-engage with their forest fields in order to inch their way toward their aspired lives as independent cultivators in the local society.

The expressions of freedom and choices discussed and examined in this chapter do not indicate the end of poverty as it was or as it is at present but underscores the sense of place and necessities that labouring people demonstrate, matching their

expectations to their limited entitlements. As the research from agriculturally precarious areas have suggested: 'the diversification of exchange entitlements' through seasonal migration, may result in reduced dependence on local patron-client ties (Bremner 1974, 1996, 2007, Rogaly 1999, Fischer 1997, Mosse et al. 2005, Lerche 1997,1999) but not necessarily translate into better work, higher wages and was circular in nature due to the dearth of physical and social capital to settle down elsewhere (Bremner and Guerin 2009). As Bates (2000:32) points out, when long term impoverished people appear to be exerting a choice, it is important to understand how '*a process of gradual immiseration was at work, with migrant labour being one of a variety of options open to peasants and tribals in which they might attempt to resist the pressures they were under. As, such they undoubtedly exercised a choice, but that choice was exercised in an environment heavily structured by other features of the culture, society and above all, economy in which they lived.*' Since labouring choices began from a differentiated situation it also led to predetermined outcomes for people from different social classes (Bremner 2007).

7.1 Wage Work in Mahulkonda Village

During the short agricultural cycle of Borasambar, only a limited number of wage working days are generated in an average size village like Mahulkonda. A greater number of women compared to men performed agricultural wage work in the village. Village people had remarked on this 'feminization' of wage labour as deriving from the less interest shown by men to work for local farmers against paddy wages. Apart from ploughing, women performed all other agricultural work in the village. Women were paid at the rate of Rs.20 or in kind wages of 5 tambi paddy per day. This wage rate is the same as what is paid to men and a minor improvement on the 3 tambi paddy that they could earn, per day in the early twentieth century.

By following an adult Goud woman's work pattern through one crop cycle in 2003, the following pattern was obtained. In the paddy transplantation season (June-August), Usha found work for 14 days in the fields of five different farming households. She had worked for 12 days weeding the rice fields. In autumn (September-October), during the harvest of upland crops, she had worked for 18

days harvesting moong, sesame, groundnuts and konhoriya-pot (yarn crop like jute). During the Paddy harvest month (October –November), Usha had worked for 21 days, cutting paddy and carrying them in head loads to the threshing area (khola). Most of the sahkars paid her wages in paddy and at the end of the agricultural season she had worked for 66 days and earned 15.5 khundi of paddy (that could yield approximately 93kg rice depending upon the quality of paddy) and Rs.80 in cash wages. Since 2002-03 was a drought year, agricultural employment had shrunk in Mahulkonda. Usha had estimated that she had worked for at least 103 days in the previous year. This did not include the labour she had contributed to their small family farm.

Compared to Usha, Bedo, a Binjhal woman who migrated to the ‘canal area’ (villages in eastern Bargarh district) on a regular basis for agricultural wage work, had the following pattern of work and earning. Bedo had worked in Mahulkonda for 30 days, transplanting and harvesting paddy and upland crops. She had spent 30 days in the month of August in the canal area, transplanting paddy. Every year, Bedo went to the canal again in summer, for transplanting the second paddy crop. But in 2003, she had to come home early because her daughter had fallen sick. Bedo had taken her daughter who was sixteen, and due to appear for her school examination, to the canal for the first time. Unlike Usha, Bedo’s earnings had a greater share of cash. She had earned Rs.700 for a month’s work in the canal. Having lost her husband many years ago, Bedo found it difficult to cultivate her small field unless she found ploughing help. Since it was not useful for her to be in the village, she tried to maximise her earnings almost entirely from migrant wage work.

For labouring men, the clear preference was to balance several options: migrate for cash incomes, work in government wage work sites in summer and if available tend to their own or leased fields at other times. For instance, Belar Singh, a Binjhal man, had ploughed and sowed his own field in July. In autumn, he had done wage work at an on going irrigation project in the nearby village for 30 days and by December had gone to the canal for the paddy harvest season that lasted for 30 days. In spring, he had collected and sold kendu leaf. From these jobs he had earned Rs.4000. He had avoided going to the canal for the second harvest in summer and had worked instead at the various government sponsored small water reservoir projects in the

neighbouring villages, for another 25 days where wages had been paid in rice instead of paddy. Belar Singh's wife had worked both in Mahulkonda and in the canal during the transplantation season in the same period. Most of the village men, who belonged to the labouring social groups, follow a work pattern similar to that of Belar Singh.

But a few men still worked as permanent farm workers for the wealthier households. Bisi Bag, a Goud man, was among the few men who worked as a haliya in 2003. From June-November, Bisi worked in the fields of the Brahman sahuکار for whom he had been working for the last 15 years and for which he received monthly wages in paddy. This amounted to 7khondi paddy per month. Post the harvest of paddy in Mahulkonda, he had like other labouring men of the village gone to the canal and later laboured in government programmes. For many small jobs that would come up through the summer slack season in the sahuکار's family, such as fencing, cutting and stacking fuel-wood, minor repairs and brick making, Bisi would be summoned. But these jobs he said were paid for piece-rate, in cash or paddy. There was also almost no possibility Bisi told me that the sahuکار would oblige him by loaning him small amounts of money if asked.

Work as a haliya, he said and it had seemed to me as well, did not appear to be any different from regular wage labour and provided 6 month of assured work, for a few people. Moreover it was not an option that older labouring men refused if they needed the work. Even Belar Singh had worked two seasons earlier as a haliya for a village sahuکار. But in Mahulkonda, though farm labouring itself was not very stigmatic due to the high value that farming castes like Kulthas laid on self-labouring and the extent to which they worked on their own farms, labouring for 'others' as involve in haliya work implied subordination. Some of this understanding is found especially in the decisions that women take and are permitted to take about farm labouring.

In Mahulkonda and its neighbouring villages, women did not go to work in government work-sites but many like Belo migrated temporarily to the irrigated areas in the peak season. Despite the higher cash earnings obtained by migrants, for

women of higher status jati groups such work implied loss of respect, or confirming the impoverished situation of their family. When Kultha women migrate to the canal areas, they suffered criticism and loss of respect. The notion of inside and outside, in the sense of family and community was very important for women whose labouring status outside their family was unaccepted but who nevertheless needed the wage labour earnings. The options available for them apart from labouring on their own farms was to seek employers of their own jati group and failing that to work for those attributed with undisputed higher ritual status such the village headman or Brahmans. Caste based restrictions made some women more amenable towards being captive labour within the village that was available to serve the limited needs of the family-farms and the village sahkars as and when required despite lower wages. In 2003, Kultha women from farming families assured me during the rice transplantation season that they were heading out for work but only till the gountia's fields. For the Binjhal or Goud women whose labouring identities were unproblematic, there were more choices both inside and outside the village. Still, the stricture on women labouring on farms or forests was a recent and highly flexible rule, applicable most strongly in the past to the wealthy headman and Brahman families.

Mahulkonda sahkars rely greatly on farm workers and remain important providers of work in the village. Dependence on farm workers is greater among the Brahmans who did not use the plough themselves, wealthier women headed households and the new sahkars, the 'white collar' employees who did not have the time. The poorer village people too needed the farm wage work that the sahkars provided in the village. But they were not at anyone's 'beck and call', as they had been twenty years ago and were able to bargain a little more with the sahkars. In the drought year of 2002, regular canal goers had been indifferent to the reduced work demand in what was supposed to be the peak agricultural season in the village, the Ashad khed. They were waiting to be called to the canal villages, by the agent and sahkars. Daily wages for farm workers had increased from early twentieth century rates of 3tambi paddy to 6 tambhi paddy or Rs.25 for a day and both men and women workers received the same rate.

Considerations of income and respect had a different effect on labouring men. It led them to seek work as much as possible outside the village and kin group. The greater income from migrant wages enabled them to re-establish themselves as farmers as well as gave them an escape route from erratic nature of local employment, low wages and the ascriptions of caste that came with farm labouring. While the scenario that labouring men were making a decision based on purely on the calculation of their advantages within the limitations of their resources of their social position seem clear, hatred of dependent farm work despite the rhetoric was not self-evident. Such forms of labouring were not so problematic and even sought after by labouring men in the past while they were clearly despised but were not always refused (either by Belar Singh or Bisi Bag above) even at present.

Bisi's arrangements with the sahuakar may indicate how migrant labouring in this case was mutually advantageous, for sahuakars because they did not have to pay the farm worker for the whole year, and for the person working as haliya who can maximize and negotiate agricultural wage earnings by working both inside and outside the village. But this presumed mutuality did not erase the power differential between the sahuakar and haliya and indicated the continued difficulties of meeting subsistence needs by families unsupported by sufficient arable land. If haliya work in the past can be described as a sort of well accepted distress-dependence strategy that was not despicable for people from labouring social groups, at present it was discredited but difficult to refuse because of its necessity as one of the options in the livelihood repertoire of older labouring men. People remember a time though when being haliya was the established routes taken by adult men of land-poor families, without which they had access to nothing except the forests to earn a living. Forest work unlike farm labouring was suggestive of autonomy but also greater hunger and crisis of survival.

7.2 Being a Haliya: Distress-Dependence

Sudabon was born in Mahulkonda, as was his father. Though his grandfather came from Umrads' jhankar family. Sudabon was a Binjhal man, roughly 60-70 years, who despite his frail frame, full head of white hair, wrinkled toothless mouth – was

reputed to be the best tree cutter in the village. Every evening in summer he was seen with his two sling baskets walking down the village road peddling the wood he had cut in the morning. The day I had this conversation with him about being haliya, he was in a contemplative mood and asked me to arbitrate. His son wanted his help to cultivate the small family field, but he preferred going to the forest. For him, forests were a habit and freedom and helped him to retain his independent source of income as long as he could manage. He told me as an aside that he didn't like to ask for anything, neither food nor money for his daily drink that eased his aching bones from his son. In Mahulkonda differences over labour contribution of family members was a common cause of dispute often evoking expressions of moral disorder.

As three baby parakeets squawked in their makeshift cage, the plough buffaloes, their ribs prominent, drowsed in the heat, Sudabon had said that roaming the forests came later and at first he was just a haliya. On asking him about being haliya, he had smiled broadly and said it meant being, 'a naukhar (servant) that's who I was. Can you understand what that means?' Sudabon belonged to a migrant Binjhal jama, distinguished by their exceptional poverty. Before him his father and paternal uncle had worked as haliya for the sahu-kars of Mahulkonda and neighbouring villages. They had been too poor to reclaim and farm the portion of land that his grandfather had obtained in the outskirts of Mahulkonda. A brief sketch of Sudabon's life story indicates that while working as haliya gave one little respect or resources, loss of this work could jeopardise the very survival of families in the past. The details of his life indicate that intra-rural migration within Borasambar was a common livelihood strategy practised by labouring villagers in the past.

When Sudabon was a small boy (8-9 years) and his younger siblings crawling babies, his father and paternal uncle had left Mahulkonda to work in a village called Gyan with their whole families. Gyan was an eastern village, reputed for the extent and quality of its farming land and irrigation resources. The bhogra (village headman's land) of Gyan was nearly 800 acres compared to the 116 acres in Mahulkonda. Gyan was Sudabon's mother's village and this connection ensured that his father and uncle had found work as haliya for two Kultha families. In Gyan,

Sudabon's two siblings had died, in close succession for reasons he did not know. When he was twenty, they had come back to Mahulkonda. The very next year, Mahulkonda people had decided to dam the village stream. As a result their small patch of land had got submerged. Their family some gochar (pasture) land from abundant gochar in the village and asked to cultivate that. Although they were promised that they would get the land regularised by the collector's orders, this never happened.

The year they lost their land to the dam, he had started working as a haliya in a village Brahman household. In those days they were paid 3khondi dhan mashri (roughly 60 kg paddy per month) (little less than half of what Bisi Bag - previous section received in 2003). He had worked on a 'chirul' basis. This meant that there had been no loan transaction and the work arrangement with the sahuakar would come to an end at the end of the agricultural season. Since he was unmarried at that time, his father was given 2-3 sacks of Paddy (1 sack – 75 kg) at 'nistar', the full moon day in January (Push-Punni) that marked the end of agricultural season. It was common for families to live on the Paddy advances from the nistar wages earned by adult sons. This income lasted only till the son got married and began his own family. For young men, marriage marked the end of dependence not from sahuakars but patriarchal (sometimes matriarchal) family heads. In case of Sudabon, this transition did not take place seamlessly.

Village women said that in his youth Sudabon had been handsome and a dashing karma dancer. He had not only charmed the daughter of a village Brahman family but had shaken the village by running away with her. She was the daughter of a wealthy and respectable sahuakar family. He was a Binjhal and a haliya. This act of transgression by a farm worker of a socially subordinate jati group had created a huge turmoil in the village, forcing the new family to flee Mahulkonda after suffering terrible humiliation and privation. They had drifted from one village to another. Everywhere Sudabon had worked as haliya for different farmers. Four children were born to them during this itinerant life; only two had survived. By early seventies, the family of four had decided to move back to Mahulkonda.

In those days village sahuikars were very powerful. Sudabon had never found farm work in Mahulkonda again and his young family had been forced to depend on whatever he could earn from the forest. Sudabon told me that he had decided to quit working as haliya by then. While by the 1970s, Sudabon's wife's brothers had left the village; other sahuikars would not hire him. Their family had settled down on the very edge of the village. He had started going to the forest more and more to feed his family. Often walking to the Jubakhol dongar (hills and reserve forest areas towards the south of the village, roughly 30 km away) on foot to get bamboo shoots, bamboo, mushrooms, small timber and firewood— 'it was back breaking work' and sold it in the village. If people needed timber for their houses or bamboo they would call on him. Those he described as the terrible years. He mentioned how his land remained empty while he looked for rice everyday to feed his family. This had included pilfering standing crops from unwatched, distant paddy fields. It was not just his unique circumstances that made survival difficult in those years.

From the mid 1960s till the end of 1970s, Borasambar like other parts of Western Orissa had suffered from repeated crop droughts. Even the stable farmers, Sudabon said, were 'harvesting straw'. None were employing many farm workers, let alone a haliya. He had kept going to the forest since there were always people in the village who had rice in the house to pay him. The end of seventies saw the first development-welfare programs come to the village. Like other impoverished people Sudabon spoke about the labouring work that people like him got through the NGO programs. The early 1980s also brought positive developments to his family as his elder son finished school education (a rare achievement for the Binjhals of farm working class back then) enabled through government programme for the adivasi and obtained employment with the railway police. For Sudabon, this was the highpoint of his family's trajectory. But the sense of wellbeing had been short lived.

Sudabon's eyes had filled with tears for the first time since we had started talking, as he described in meticulous detail, as though reliving the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of his capable son in a distant place. The event had driven his

wife mad with grief. Sudabon had continued going to the forest while his younger son who had not been sent to school had started farming the family land. With the compensation money received from the railways and with the coming of the minor irrigation project that brought water close to their field, Sudabon and his son had made their land by cutting the gochar and scrub. They still did not have a legal title to their land but after a few years of hard work the land had started yielding paddy. Sudabon said that the money they had used to cultivate their fields was terrible 'bone-money' that did no one any good.

The above brief account of Sudabon's life reveals a time in the village when apart from haliya work subsistence opportunities were limited and insecure for people who did not farm. Haliya work guaranteed little more than bare subsistence along with the ascription of low status. But Binjhal families trying to survive by working in the forest cutting trees and selling forest produce slid even further down the survival ladder. Such a way of making a living despite its suggestion of autonomy meant extreme impoverishment in village standards. Unlike permanent farm workers, forest earnings were demand driven and forest workers had no access to consumption credit (lag) essential for survival when work was not available. Moreover forests had receded and gleanings had become riskier as village forests got depleted and people had to venture further into state reserve forests. Forest dependence was a subsidiary source of livelihoods for most villagers of Mahulkonda but was not viable as the sole basis of support.

Other Binjhal families have mentioned dependence on the forest as the most impoverished phase of their lives. Domki a Binjhal woman (40-45years) told me how when she had first come to Mahulkonda as a new bride, her saas-ghar (mother in law's household), who were practically landless, would be away at the forest for days on end. They had lived by cutting trees, making Mahul liquor on illegal home stills and selling it in the village. This work she told me, had meant going hungry often, living in fear of excise police raids and allowing drunken men to loiter near ones' house at all times. She had persuaded her husband to take up work as a haliya for the village gountia family. This was one of the few households in Mahulkonda that

still employed haliya, though not as many as before. In 2002, roughly 20 years late, Domki's husband still worked as a haliya for the gountia's household. From, Domki's point of view, the steady work had helped them not only to subsist but also save some money to buy a small patch of forest covered land in the neighbouring village and keep their own herd of goats for emergencies. Apart from their small kharif harvest, the increasing rates of dried Mahul flowers meant that their forest edged agricultural land fetched them a good income in summer.

Domki's story suggests that haliya work continues to serve limited usefulness for labouring families who had little else except the state reserve forest to fall back on. However, permanent farm work was not created out of consideration for the needs of labouring families. Instead it was the necessities created by the agrarian expansion in sparsely populated Borasambar in the first half of twentieth century that generated the demand for labouring work force. Haliya contracts were important to ensure the availability of workers during peak season at a time when most people had their own lands to farm or could easily obtain forest-fields. From the 1960s it was increasingly hard to find long term farm work in Borasambar and labouring families had spread out eastwards looking for work where the social milieu was not dissimilar to home but large dam irrigation and green revolution in paddy had increased the demand for wage labour.

7.3 Mutuality out of Necessity: Farm Working Arrangements of the Past

Sudabon's account indicates intra-rural migration within Borasambar or neighbouring Patna in search of permanent farm work was common in the past. Usually marital or other connections in one village led people to find similar work in other villages. Labouring households led near itinerant lives, working as haliya and migrating with their young families from village to village. Many people remember their fathers and grandfathers working as haliya for the big sahumars and gountia households of Mahulkonda and neighbouring villages in the past. This ensured farm work for the entire agricultural season though at predetermined wages in kind.

Men had in the past, usually embarked on their journey towards being a permanent farm worker early in life. In the numerically dominant Binjhal and Goud families, young boys started working as 'kuthias' (literally those who lived at kuthi-home) in the homes of their employers. As kuthias, boys would do farm work for daily meals and sometimes lived at the sahukar's house. Employers did not have to be big landowners. Gopalo, a Goud man (60 years) told me how as a small boy he had worked as a kuthia at his own uncle's house. Later he had worked for the jhankar (Binjhal priests) family for nearly a decade simply for two meals. Boys, who began their labouring lives as kuthias, became haliyas in their adulthood. The latter were paid better but also did more work. The initiative for obtaining work as haliyas and kuthias, in case of unmarried men, was taken by the fathers or and by their mothers. The stipulated annual payment in paddy, at the end of the agricultural season, ('push-punni'), called (nistar or khama) due to all haliyas and kuthias, was given not to labouring boys or men but to their fathers or mothers. The latter often used the advances on the nistar grain payment of their sons to meet the families' subsistence needs.

When sons started working as haliya, fathers usually moved on to farming small plots of land or doing a variety of temporary wage work. As the adult men got married, they sometimes continued labouring as haliya but no longer shared their grain payments with their parent family. Instead this income was used to start and maintain a new family. With the marriage of all the adult sons and daughters, family fields if available were partitioned evenly among the new families of the sons. When the sons born in these new families reached adulthood, their fathers could move away from haliya work while obtaining similar work for their children. This cycle tended to break if particular families had only daughters. Chandra, a Binjhal woman told me how her father worked all his life as a haliya for a Brahman sahukar's family. While she and her sister did wage work since they were girls, her father could not leave haliya work to obtain or cultivate his land because he had no sons.

Thus, haliya and kuthia work relationships of the past suggest several interlocking types of dependencies and hierarchies. The permanent farm working roles suggested subjection and subordination both to sahu-kars-employers, and patriarchal family heads and hence was organized through and produced caste and age hierarchies. Since haliyas and kuthias were paid in grain wages and food, this relationship was premised on unequal and unreciprocated exchange. A situation that could be disguised somewhat if the sahu-kars and farm workers belonged to the same jati group.

In a study conducted in the 1970s in western Borasambar it is mentioned how Binjhal preferred to work as haliya for Binjhal farmers and Binjhal farmers hired people from their own jati who were usually kin to them (Panda 2005). But in Mahulkonda similar to many eastern villages, the big sahu-kars who employed as many as 6-10 haliyas prior to 1970s were Brahman and Kultha farmers and village headmen. The point in these more densely inhabited villages where competition for work was high, land was scarce and forests unless on private land had receded to the periphery, was not about protecting ones' jati status but to ensure survival by obtaining farm-labouring work when and where it was available. Here, it was not haliya work that made people poor but gradual impoverishment over generations which drove them towards these work roles that confirmed their subordinate status. Many Binjhal and Goud families sent their sons to work as kuthia and haliya wherever possible, for better off kin as well as local sahu-kars of diverse jati groups. Suru Singh (60 years) a Binjhal man remembered how his mother had sent him to his maternal uncle's village when he was a boy to live as a kuthia. His uncle did not have any sons and needed help to look after his herd and land. Suru Singh had lived there for nearly a decade. After differences arose within the family through unfulfilled expectations, he had returned to Mahulkonda and worked for local sahu-kars.

The significant thing about haliya work for impoverished villagers was the security of wages it provided through the year, against the scarcities created by the sudden dip in farm employment in after the winter harvest of paddy, in the short agricultural season of Borasambar. People working as haliyas received wages every month

even after the peak kharif season ended every year. An important source of discontent among people who worked as haliya in Mahulkonda was the reduction in these wages over the years. In Binjhal villages of eastern Borasambar (1970), the haliya were paid Rs.50-80 as bahbandha amount. Paddy worth 50 khondi as annual wages, two meals a day, harvested crops from a field of 0.5 acres, two sets of clothes in winter for guarding crops, paddy worth 10-12 khondi as nistar or khama (Panda 2005). Compared to this, in Mahulkonda, the haliya were paid predominantly in paddy – 3khondi paddy per month and 2-3 sacks as nistar. The custom of providing fields for cultivation (buna) or (kulapari) bonuses at harvest time was discontinued by the middle of the twentieth century. Though people who worked as haliya did borrow money from their sahuks to meet expenses such as that of bride price, the borrowed money turned them into ‘bahbandha’ (literally arms tied) or beholden to work for the sahuks for a few more years.

In 2002, the haliyas in Mahulkonda worked on six monthly rather than yearly contracts and received 3khondi paddy per month and 3-5 purug paddy as nistar. The haliyas, who received 7khondi paddy per month, did not receive anything as nistar. Even at present, taking a cash loan from the sahuks by the haliya converted him into a ‘bahbandha’. Mahulkonda wage rates remain almost identical to what had been available in the early twentieth century (O'Malley 1909).⁹⁰ But haliya contracts

⁹⁰ An early twentieth century description of attached labour arrangement is given in the gazetteer entry for Patna-state (Bolangir district) and provides the following details of payment of attached farm labourers (Cobden-Ramsay 1910). The permanent farm labourers were called *guti* or *halia*. For wages they received, 2-3 khondi Paddy each month and 6-12 khondi Paddy at the end of the year. Most were hired on a yearly basis. In addition to the paddy wages, they were given two pieces of cloth worth 12 annas. Farm workers were sometimes given fields of their own to cultivate. These fields (called buna) were valued in terms of their yields: one *patti* of sugarcane valued Rs.2, crop yielded from land that required 1 khondi worth of Paddy seeds, 1 Tambi of pulse and 1 Tambi of Sesame. During harvest time, the Gutis were also given 10 Tambi Paddy for every 20 khondi that was threshed. They were also given grains and pulses for everyday consumption. The Khamari or the more experienced Gutis received higher wages. In addition to the payments in kind, the Gutis were also lent cash sums amounting from Rs.4 to Rs.20 for a year without interest. Called ‘bahbandha’, the condition for this payment was that he remained with his employer till the money was repaid. Younger boys employed as ‘Kuthias’ were provided with food and clothes and paid 4-8 Khondi of Paddy at the end of the year (Cobden-Ramsay 1910:294). A similar account is available for the Gutis of Sambalpur district (O'Malley 1909). The permanent farm servants in Sambalpur also called *guti* were hired under similar terms of remuneration. In Sambalpur, the gutis were often provided two plots of land for cultivation consisting of upland and lowland types. According to the gazetteer entry, the cultivation of these lands using the employing farmer's plough bullocks made the gutis' earnings sufficient to allow him to acquire small plots of tenancy lands in his own right.

have overtime been pared down and come to resemble ordinary (bhuti) or labouring wages.

In the Mahulkonda of the past, bigger sahkars employed greater number of haliyas. Gopal, a Goud man who had worked as a haliya in the village headman's house and a Brahman sahkars house again for over a decade, told me that between the two households nearly ten people had been employed as haliya in those days. It was not just the big farmers or sahkars of Mahulkonda but even middle farmers who could employ haliya and kuthia for a short term if they had paddy to spare over and above their own use. A Kallar family described how they had frequently 'kept' haliyas and kuthias, whenever they had paddy to spare. Sometimes, poorer kin members would be employed on such roles. The Kallar woman told me how she had in recent times brought her brother's daughter's son, to work as haliya since their family was very poor. It was the declining agriculture of eastern Borasambar villages and the drought years that began in the 1960s, that drove a great many people who could previously find employment as haliya toward utter destitution.

In a study conducted in Borasambar villages in the early seventies, the local farmers had mentioned the curtailment in the payments of attached labourers and their incapacity to hire permanent farm labourers (Baboo 1992: 81). Clearly, the period in which expansion of cultivation in the forests of Borasambar had created the farmer-sahkars and generated demand for farm workers was nearing a premature end. From the 1960s people had started venturing beyond the boundaries of Borasambar, travelling to the Hirakud dam irrigated villages in Bargarh district, also known as the 'khalsa area' in search of farm labouring work. This migration trend reversed what had happened a hundred years ago when farmers had moved from the khalsa area villages to Borasambar zamindari in search of land.

7.4 The Drought Decades: Flight and Return

Mahulkonda people remember a time when the parts of the village inhabited by the jama of the Binjhal and Goud jati became deserted. Farm working arrangements that

Mahulkonda villagers found in eastern Bargarh were not dissimilar to what had existed back home. Local narratives indicate that Mahulkonda villagers escaping the hunger of the drought season appreciated both the cash earning as well as the similarities in the social and economic relations of farm work. Mahulkonda farming families too had suffered from the drought years and their grain stores had been depleted. But only a few had fled the village in the period between 1960-80. To begin with migration took place through the pressure of drought but the fact that the migrants had been to begin with labouring families meant that they were not exercising much choice.

Shankaro, a Binjhal man (50-60 years old) recalled going to eastern Bargarh when the canals had first started bringing the irrigation water. This was the early 1960s when in the irrigated villages there was a general demand for agricultural labour, to 'make land' suitable for rice cultivation and later for transplantation and harvesting of Paddy. Shankaro had first visited the canal villages for a Paddy harvest. In the subsequent year he had gone with a large work party consisting of women and men in the transplantation season. But no one paid them any wage advances. He remembered their meagre rations running out before they had received their first wages. One evening he found a woman from their group crying because she had nothing to eat. They had pooled all their money and gone to a store in the village. The shopkeeper, a kindly woman, had seen their plight and given them a sack of rice to last through the planting season. It helped the old man told me that her son's name was also Shankaro, the same as his. Thus a bond of trust and friendship had been established between them. (Here Shankaro was speaking about being 'mahaprasad', ritual friendship common in western Orissa and Chattisgarh). Shankaro had told her that they were working hungry and had given her all the money they had between them. She had not taken their money but told them to return the rice after they had earned their wages. Thus they had survived through this act of 'friendship' had eaten, worked and come home. Their cash earnings then had seemed large. Since then, he had gone to the canal many times, sometimes even four times in a year. But Mahulkonda families, later in the decade did not have the choice to return to the village at the end of the agricultural season.

Initially many families had visited the canal area to do wage labour to tide over the bad season. Golapo's, a Binjhal man (45-50 years) described how one year in the 1970s when no work could be found in Borasambar, he had gone with his mother and sister to a village called Kornatikra in Attabira. Some Mahulkonda families were already working there and this village had become the key migrant destination. It was transplantation season and they had earned cash wages after working for two weeks. At the end of the season, Golapo had not returned to Mahulkonda. Instead he had taken 5 purug paddy as a wage advance from a local sahuکار and sent his family home with the paddy. Later his annual wages had gone up to 8 purug paddy. Later the sahuکار had also given him a tiny field to cultivate. It was while living in Kornatikra that he had married Lata. She was a Binjhal girl from a village in Patna (Bolangir district), who had come to the canal with her father and elder brother to do wage work. According to Golapo, the times were bad in Mahulkonda and his father, mother and brother had visited frequently to borrow money or Paddy.

By the early 1980s, wage work provided by NGO and government drought relief projects had brought Golapo and many others back to Mahulkonda. He had been having differences with the sahuکار. After staying in Mahulkonda for 4 years, when he did a variety of wage work in the relief projects that was coming to the village, he had gone back to the canal. The sahuکار from the canal village, Barhamunda had come to call him back. Both he and Lata had gone back to the canal. His elder son Saroj was born in the canal, the same year. Golapo had given up working as a haliya only after his father's death and the partition of family land. Coming back to claim inherited land is a common practise among the Binjhals. But without a combination of factors, the public welfare projects and renewed interest in agriculture of Mahulkonda sahuکارs with the coming of irrigation, Golapo may not have been able to enter this stage of the lifecycle.

Unlike Golapo, Shibo (30-40 years old), a Binjhal man had been much younger during the trouble years. His father and mother had first gone for wage work in Khalliapalli with him and his younger brother. Two years later Shibo's father had died. Shibo's mother then had taken him to the canal village again. Though too small

to be hired as a ploughman, he could be and was given as a kuthia. Shibo had stayed as a kuthia in the canal-village for eight years. As a kuthia his work was to tend to the household cattle, cut grass for cattle feed and assist in ploughing the land. As wages he had received only two meals and a place to sleep. His mother was given his wages in paddy payment at the end of each season.

In the canal villages it was even more difficult to maintain the illusion of kinship in labouring arrangements. Patel (45-50 years), a Keunt man from Mahulkonda told me how his family, which had fled Mahulkonda to escape hunger in the 1970s to return only after a decade, had found farm work in a relatively less prosperous 'tail-end' village in the canal area. Their employers were also Keunt people who did not have much land but needed labouring help because their sons were small. Patel's family had lived in a small makeshift house on the farmers' land. When Patel became an adult, and started working as a haliya, they had found him a girl from among their impoverished relatives. He had married his 'malik's' wife's sister's daughter. Despite the ameliorating presence of jati and kin ties, haliya work is never viewed as assistance or help (sahaji) but always as an asymmetrical, unequal commercial relationship. Patel described with sarcastic bitterness how as a new family they had built their house near his 'malik's' cattle shed and how their first-born had died there.

By the mid 1980s, most Mahulkonda families had come back to the village. This was enabled by the changes brought about by public expenditure in irrigation and other forms of support. Many labouring people found wage work in Borasambar villages through government projects. Local sahkars too had benefitted from irrigation projects and had started hiring farm workers again. But travelling to the canal area henceforth remained a seasonal migration strategy to augment other sources. By end 1980s, Shibo had also come back to the village, hoping to begin farming his small field that was now receiving irrigation water. But he had needed money for various reasons - to pay bride price for his marriage and to buy a pair of plough oxen. He had started working for Mahulkonda sahkars who were hiring farm servants again. But wage rates even in the mid eighties had been low and he would get only 3 khondi paddy every month (same as what Sudabon had received 20-30

years ago) and a few purug of paddy at the end of the season. Expenses from marriage, medical emergencies and birth of children in the subsequent years ensured that he had continued to work as a haliya in Mahulkonda. In 2002, Shibo worked for a Mahulkonda Brahman sahuakar, while trying to farm his own land. Though wage rates had gone up, Shibo had complained bitterly about not being able to give up haliya work. Perception about haliya work had changed dramatically in the village. Working for stagnant paddy wages evoked the worst kinds of criticism, it affected the self-esteem of men and made them appear abject and dependent as though the times of hunger had not been overcome.

It is clear that if irrigation and public expenditure had not revived interest in agriculture in Mahulkonda, people would stay away a lot more. A woman I met from a small village in the neighbouring Patna district mentioned how in their village, every single able-bodied man was away at the canal for prolonged periods every year. Indeed in December, when there were a few deaths in the village, only women had been present to lift the bodies and perform last rites.

Changing perception about farm labouring has not only been shaped by other avenues of earning wages but also the growing preoccupation by villagers of their respect and self- identities framed by the unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of hierarchies and the discourse of equality. It is not the confirmation of labouring identities but what people may have achieved despite their ascriptive positions and identities being the standard that shaped impoverished villagers' observations. For the sahuakars, the point was to muster or consolidate their fading control over labouring people and hence the local society through whatever resources available. It is easy to attribute the causality of this process to the increased cash earnings through migrant wage work. And yet migration continues to be interpreted through a great many different positions and experiences that lends it a high amount of ambivalence in the local society.

7.5 A trip to the Brick Kilns

In 2002, Gilo Sahu, a Haldiya Teli man (60 years), his wife and adult son had gone to visit his married daughter. She lived in a village called Jharbondh in the Patna area (Bolangir district). Like every year his daughters' family was preparing to go away to work at the brick kilns of Waltair (Andhra Pradesh). Often they could not wait back in the village, 'watching' their kharif paddy grow and ripen. Like always Gilo and his son helped to harvest their paddy. But that year, the migrant brick making party had fallen short by two people who had decided against going at the last minute.

Gilo's son in law, the leader of the party had taken an advance of Rs.7000 from the 'sardar', contractor. It was his responsibility to provide the promised numbers of wage labour. He had asked Gilo and his wife to join them for the trip. So, the old people had decided to help their daughter and son in law; him to make bricks and her to cook for the family and take care of the small children, 7 and 9 years old. They were a part of a large group consisting of 25 families, most of them from the villages of Patna. The contractor or sardar was a 'harijan' from the railhead town of Belpara. Gilo said that he had nothing at the beginning, being a labourer himself but after establishing his business of supplying labour to the Waltair brick kilns, for twenty years he had bought land and was now making a large 'RC' house in Belpara.

From Jharbondh their group had taken a bus to Belpara and from there caught a train to Waltair. Their tickets and food during the journey was taken care of by the 'sardar'. It was terribly crowded in the train. They sat in the train at 3 in the afternoon and reached Waltair at 10 in the morning the next day. From the train station they took another bus to the place where they made bricks. They were given a place to stay. Every group was given Rs.360 per week for food and Rs.10 extra if someone was mixing 'bhusa' with the mud. They started work early in the morning, took an hour break in the afternoon and worked till late into the night.

Gilo said that their group could make about 2000 bricks everyday and about 12000 every week. He mentioned a man there who could work without breaks and make

about 16000 bricks every week. He was a paik and wore a 'paita' sacred thread. 'A kshatriya like you all', he said referring to the Binjhal men who were sitting on the pirha listening to us. The malik gave inam' (reward) of Rs.30 to anyone who would make more than 10000 bricks every week. They were given a notebook to keep track of how many bricks they made everyday. Though none of them could read or write, they could count. Gilo said that they counted the raw bricks when they set them to dry.

One day, a family had disappeared. According to Gilo the malik didn't bother people at work but were very angry when people ran away. But people did it all the time. When Haju's family could not be found, they sent notices to all the railway stations. If they had been caught they would be beaten up. But by and large they couldn't do much if the runaways reached their own village. Gilo said: 'they can't surely beat you in your own house?' Haju was Gilo's brother's son, though they had not gone together and were not part of the same work party. But Patna villagers had pointed Gilo's group out as relatives to the malik. As a result, the malik had cut Rs.5000 from their wages. Gilo said that was really hard to take. Still he had blamed not the 'malik' but Patna villagers. Sighing he had said: 'that's what we are like in Orissa, we do each other harm.'

After what they had spent on food, the advance money that was taken and the Rs.5000 penalty' what they had brought home was next to nothing. Gilo's son in law, who was their group leader, had not given him anything personally. Gilo said that he was too ashamed to ask his daughter for money. But he was also certain that he wouldn't go there ever again, he felt he had been tricked into it. In Patna, he told me, 'everyone migrates whereas in Borasambar we like to live at home.' His explanation was that the Patna people were spendthrift and did not save, eating a lot of meat and fish. They ate very well in Patna, he said, chicken every other day and did not live on rice water like them. Some of them were doing well, making some savings from their wage work, buying land, making houses. Whereas in Borasambar people were frugal and would much rather could live on a little rice-water (thir) at home. If they worked away from home at all they went to the canal.

According to Gilo, Patna people could really work and they did not seem to mind the conditions. But it bothered Gilo that many people died working in the kilns, especially children, pregnant women and old people. Though the malik gave them money to buy wood and for other funeral expenses, there was no time to mourn. People got rid of their dead and went back to work almost immediately, the last rites would be left for when they are back in the village. That year many people had died. Children had also been born there and seven couples had run away together. When they ran away, it was terrible for the people who are left behind. If you wanted to take leave, the malik would ensure that you left some family members behind.

Haldiya Teli people, like Gilo Sahu's family were among the more prominent migrants in the village. His son and daughter in law went as far as Uttar Pradesh one year, for agricultural labouring. Gilo's daughter in law's description about doing 'seva' in the temple of Ayodhya while in UP, suggests that they may have recruited from Borasambar (as 'kar sevaks') by political functionaries during early 1990s when Hindu fundamentalist political activism had reached its height in the area. After that trip, though, Gilo's family had adhered to the general pattern of migration that is, going to the canal villages. But as a community they were more aware of migration routes because of their relatives in the neighbouring Patna villages. Many Haldiya Teli people were landowning farmers, but people from poorer branches, took labouring work when required. Few older men in Mahulkonda had even worked as haliya. Their position in the regional hierarchy, pressed between Kultha and Brahman sahuks and labouring people, and their past of itinerant trading, may have made them more adventurous than others. In general, like other villagers, the older people remained sceptical about the notion of migration.

In 2003 when Gilo's wife died, without any conspicuous illness in the rain months, there was a much gossip in Mahulkonda about the old people's migration. According to villagers', the old people had been forced to migrate to the distant place from hunger, because their son had refused to provide for them. Mahulkonda villagers in general disapproved of distant and long-term migration and associated migrant

destinations as immoral and disorderly. It is difficult to decide whether this reflected the sahuکار's point of view and their needs for agricultural labour or village peoples' fear of losing their small assets, in both material and symbolic terms, their fields and relational identities.

7.6 Ambivalent interpretation of Migration

Migrant wage labour allowed people to escape the dead end penury of rural livelihoods like attached labouring. But ideas about migration were shaped by who a person was, where they went and how much they earned from the process. Migrant wagedworkers appreciate the higher earnings, the bargaining power it provides them with Mahulkonda sahuکارs and the credit it fetches them in the local shops. Seasonal migration has not only brought about increases in long stagnant agricultural wages but also what people view as greater freedom from local dependence on sahuکارs and more respect. Binjhal women, like Bedo told me, that these days they did not like to wait around in the village in the month of Ashad, for the sahuکارs to start sowing, for a few tambis of mildewed Paddy. It was better to go to the canal and earn dui-paisa (money). But often they also find the condition of work in the migrant villages disgusting and humiliating.

Although Borasambar villages were populated and settled by migrants, migration has pejorative connotations in the local society. The earliest migrants to have left the village in the 1960s were the dalits. These were individual families driven ravaged by drought and hunger. Their accounts suggest that among all village families they had suffered the highest levels of child mortality during that period. Some had gone as far as the South Bihar steel towns to work as domestic servant. A few had obtained employment at the Iron and steel industries. Those who had returned to Mahulkonda were wealthier than the some farming and all the labouring families. But being dalit their status though not identical to the past, still remained highly subordinate in Mahulkonda. Recent buying of rice fields, payment of large dowries in daughters' marriages and celebration of dashera in their compound by the dalit families provoked grave consternation among village families.

Traditionally, dalit men who were village musicians migrated westward to the Chattisgarhi town of Raipur in summer to play the local musical instruments at weddings. Such occupations though symbolize low status and many dalit men were ashamed to admit that they continued to play music. Despite being the most marginalized community in the local society, the dalits shared some village assumptions about migration. A dalit man told me how he had gone away to work at the thread factory (suta mill) in Bargarh when his first son was born and had lived there for six years. In those days, he had earned Rs.200 per week, much more than what he would have made if he had found work from Mahulkonda saukars. He had difficulties living in the tiny 'quarters' shared by many young men, found them to be disgusting. But eventually he had quit because the wage rates didn't go up and he couldn't save anything. Another dalit man had come back to Mahulkonda after the factory he had worked for had closed down. It had not been possible the articulate dalit man had said to live with dignity in the town without steady wages, whereas in the village, despite its old ways, pettiness and problems, he could try and become a landed person, a farmer.

Seasonal migrants complained about dirty water of the canal and the use of chemical fertilizer that they said caused skin ailments (ketra) that were 'eating up their hands and feet'. Geetanjali, a Binjhal woman described the way in which their work group would sometimes sit at the Bargarh bus stop, in the peak agricultural season, waiting for the local farmers to come and offer them a price: *'when we get off the bus in Bargarh and sit there – like cattle in rows waiting for the maliks to come and buy us, it feels like we are cattle as well, selling ourselves.'* She further described some of the villages as overcrowded and dirty and where one had to stand knee deep in water while transplanting rice, sometimes with excrements floating around them. They had hated working in the puhra (dirty) village and avoided going there. But yet the main motivation for going to such undesirable places was the money.

Canal migrants avoided going to the villages where they feel that they had been cheated. They avoided making personal relationships fearing that their wage rates would be affected. This approach was completely different from that adopted in the past, when as distressed migrants they had accepted long term relationships with specific households for paddy wages. Sometimes, Geetanjali said, they refused to go to particular villages: *'we firmly say no if someone from Gopalpali approaches us and if they ask why we tell them about the dirt and about the smell, they laugh at our audacity.'* Just as canal wages enable the labouring people to negotiate with village sahkars, the greater availability of work in Borasambar as compared to the past, help them to deal better with the employers in canal villages. Still, such livelihoods served only to maintain and consolidate the status quo and rarely changed the status or enhanced the economic wellbeing of villagers. And Mahulkonda people were well aware of this.

Migration for agricultural labouring was different from other kinds of migration. It was what migrants earned and how they had invested their earnings later that impressed villagers. Among the examples of successful migrants that poorer villagers discussed often: was the case of two brothers from the Telpida Teli or oil presser caste and from the Luhra (Blacksmith) caste. These individuals had migrated to work in a thread factory in Bhadoi district of Uttar Pradesh. Returning after many years they had opened a village shop and built a grand house.

In 2001, two young men from the Haldiya Teli caste had left to work as security guards in a garment factory in Tamil Nadu. When the news broke that they had sent money home and which their family was going to use to buy a diesel pump set, there was a lot of speculation and excited anticipation among village people who had till then spend their time spinning lurid tales about the fate awaiting them in such a distant place. These initiatives appealed to the younger men who had finished high school but considered competing for the scarce local government employment as a waste of time and working as farm labourers beneath their dignity. These were the school-educated sons of farm workers who sought different migration routes. Still these were emerging but not yet established routes. When two Binjhal boys decided

to travel to Bhadoi to work at carpet making, they had to return after six months because there was no work and therefore no hiring. In the meantime their family's scarce resources had been spent on train tickets.

Men from impoverished branches of Kultha families held out against migrating for wage as much as possible. Since they had relatively more land than the Binjhals or Gouds, they just about managed to scrape through by strategies such as joint cultivation of land or working for their wealthier kin members. Trouble emerged in drought years when the crop yields from their smaller farms were affected. In many cases the wealthier families within kin groups were the new sahuks, those whose prosperity was connected to government employment. The steady earnings from salaries had enabled these new sahuks to obtain or consolidate their landed status. When several kultha families suffered losses in their harvest in 2003, they had not migrated for wage work but had gone to work for these relatively prosperous relatives; ploughing their fields, repairing their wells and fences. Kultha women said that their men did not like to work for other praja families. At the same time there was no attempt on part of kultha men to disguise the nature of work that they did for wealthier family members as 'help' or 'exchange', insisting that these were temporary wage contracts and that they never worked for paddy and only for cash wages.

Thus the assertion of impersonal wage contract, by all village people, was a strategy that enabled them to distance themselves from the ascriptions of subordination and dependence linked with labouring work. It also helped them to obtain higher wages in cash rather than paddy. Migrant labouring supported this process by creating scarcity of labour locally. New migrant aspirations and routes on the other hand helped to consolidate farming livelihoods. Obtaining small fields, helped villagers to negotiate better with the employers of local and migrant labour. A crucial external support that has been important to labouring people as well as struggling small farmers, have been the public funded labouring projects.

7.7 Government wage work

A place where distinction of jati and status were set aside relatively easily was the government-financed projects that were aimed at generating wage labour days in the difficult summer season. In 2003, a government wage work project, financed by the panchayat was initiated in Mahulkonda. The objective was to deepen a village water reservoir (tank). This project was similar to the several such activities happening all over the administrative block during this period. Villagers were extremely enthusiastic about this kind of work, in the middle of the long summer season when wage-work is scarce. While working for sahumars they would never appear before 8:00-9:00, in government earthwork sites everyone was early. I was told that the former was doing 'bhuti' or working for someone else while 'maat-kaam' or earthwork was your own work – as much as you can earn.'

At the muda (tank) digging site, men would come early in the morning with their lunch pails full of 'pakhal' and plastic cans of water. They worked in groups of five to eight in their assigned areas, breaking, digging, then heaping earth and stones, rubble and carrying the debris in their sling baskets to the tank bund. Pillar like mounds stood like gawky termite hills here and there. These were the 'sakhyis' or proof of the amount of earth moved by a group in a week. At the end of one week the supervisor measured the amount of work done by groups and individuals and made payment. Mahulkonda men worked in mixed jati, neighbourhood groups. The groups that came from neighbouring villages were made on caste specific lines.

The atmosphere at the work site was almost festive. There was a lot of laughter and bantering among the Mahulkonda men as they dug the earth. Both seasoned earthworkers and unlikely wagedworkers were present on that tank site. Former were Binjhal men who moved from village to village working on similar government employment generation programs and irrigation works through the summer. The latter were elderly men who would not be hired elsewhere and hard up kultha farmers who were too status conscious to work for other praja and yet needed the rice or money. Men from neighbouring villages were quieter and seemed to work

harder. They had a right to be there since it was a panchayat financed work but were clearly aware of their lesser rights. But Mahulkonda men could not refuse them work not just because public works projects were meant for all, but also because they themselves, when the occasion arose, would like to work on projects that would be coming in the neighbouring villages.

People who were supervising the activity were a diverse group, consisting of the four panchayat ward members including a Binjhal and a dalit man, the woman ward member represented by her husband, a contractor from the neighbouring road-side village, the Brahman sahuکار whose tank was being deepened and a Binjhal man in whose name the work order or contract had been issued. Everyone was well aware of the fact that apart from the contractor, a kultha man and a village son in law and the Brahman farmer, the supervisory role played by the rest was merely cosmetic. People who worked on the tank side understood the politics of the tank contract and spoke about it critically.

In the gram sabha meeting the villagers had given their approval for a different water reservoir site, the chahala (small tank) that belonged to the jhankar family. But when the project arrived it came for the Brahman sahuکار's muda (big tank). Village men remarked sarcastically how the thikedar was 'one of our boys' – a Binjhal man who could not read or write. They had taken the contract (theka) in his name because he was an adivasi. But the adivasi contractor was the front of the operation while the real players were a kultha man from a nearby roadside village and the Brahman sahuکار whose land was being developed. They told me that total work cost was Rs.2 lakhs but all the money would not come to them as wages, some would be kept as 'percentage'.

This awareness did not change the fact that the wages in government sites, could be earned quickly and rates were marginally better than what local sahuکار paid for doing agricultural work. These wages were paid either in cash or rice. In one Mahulkonda group they made around 80 kg of rice for each person after only seven days of earthwork. Older men and those not used to heavy work were making less,

like the old man from harijan pada who had made only 35 kg rice after seven days. But in the end their real concern was with correct measurement and the timely payment of their rice wages.

Government wage work for its entire higher wages and appearances of secular contract also enabled the sahuks to maintain their usefulness in the village society. Not only did the Mahulkonda muda belong to a Brahman sahuks's family, even the rice wages were distributed from the pirha or house-front of this sahuks. Impoverished people depended on the sahuks to attract resources from the government to their village and they explicitly said so. It was a role that was expected from the sahuks.

7.8 Conclusion:

This chapter describes and analyzes the conditions of agricultural wage work in the Borasambar village. While the processes of the nineteenth century had forced a large numbers of erstwhile forest dwellers and descendants of nomadic herdsmen with tiny unviable farms into the ranks of agricultural wagedworkers, people who were completely dependent on selling their labour power for subsistence. Local agriculture had required labour to clear forests and level land. Local crop cycle only provided six months of employment. Long term, annual contracts (haliya) were preferred because it enabled people to take consumption loans out of their own wages. But from the 1960s, the capacity of local farming to provide agricultural employment declined even further. Agriculture had stagnated during this period, reducing even further the days of wage-work. People tended to live off the forests. Competition between labouring people meant that they worked for the better off praja and gountia families for paddy wages barely sufficient for their survival. Looking back at these forms of labouring, village people saw the power of the sahuks and their own dependence and associated such forms of work with the great poverty and forested isolation of the past.

But the most difficult phase in the lives of the village labouring families was not the past when the gountias and sahuks were powerful but the period when the rain

dependent local farming had declined through periodic droughts and forests had been greatly depleted. During this time many families had been driven out of Borasambar to search for work in the surrounding areas, where construction of a large multipurpose dam had created new opportunities for agrarian expansion. Very few had opted to work in the mines or seek their fortunes in the industrial areas of Jharkhand.

Village people remark upon these times by describing the silence in specific hamlets, the uncultivated lands that laid fallow, of young men who did not return for a decade. Farming working relations in the eastern villages was underscored by dependence and consumption loans. But there, the employers were not powerful sahkars but in many cases also small farmers. Wages were marginally higher. These labouring ties were similar to what had been available to labouring people in their home villages. There was a great deal of personal bargaining and negotiation and ties that were not just economic. These personal elements were viewed as the vulnerabilities of labouring families causing their greater subordination. In contrast people describe the advantages of impersonal ties and cash wages, which to them constituted more egalitarian transaction than a system embedded in mutual obligation.

Ties between sahkars and farm workers were renewed in the late 1980s, when public expenditure in development programs and small-scale irrigation renewed agriculture. Though farm workers were never completely dependent on the sahkars again, they were not unwilling to use this opportunity to increase their subsistence strategies. Moreover they had more bargaining power. There was no evidence of stress, distrust and tension between the farm workers and the Sahkars, no class polarization; only the farm workers followed other labouring patterns. Scarcity and expense of labour was a common refrain among sahkars. Many were willing to offer six monthly contracts on ancient paddy wages, but there were fewer takers for such work because of its past association with hunger and because it demeaned people by putting them in a position of dependence. Classified as un-remunerative and un-prestigious, more and more, farm work in the village is performed by women. In the past manual labour was never shunned by sahkar families and that trend continues. This enables larger farmers to make do with family or kin labour in face of the labour crisis at present. Except in families with steady salaried incomes, all sahkar families

have to contribute with family labour in the peak agricultural season. Men who continue to work as haliya are generally looked down upon in the village as backward people.

Traditional patterns of labour contribution, exchange and dependent ties were harnessed to the commercial objectives of agrarian production. Although these ties were devoid of ritualistic payments and appeared merely as annual contracts, they also diminished and degraded people while elevating the status of their employers. When wages were paid in meals, what emerged clearly was the desperation and hunger of the wageworkers. People associated the poverty of the past with this willingness of labouring people to work for anything even a dish of rice-water or a basket of mahul flowers and their dependence on the local sahuks who exploited their dearth. What they emphasized was the great differences in power between the labouring people and the sahuks. But farming and labouring were not distinct occupations in Borasambar villages and people led intermingled, interconnected lives. Labouring people were young adult men whose labour often supported the small-scale cultivation of their family farms.

While village accounts emphasize the agency or 'freedom' of men in performing, searching and obtaining work, labouring work was highly dependent on the ebbs and flows of demand that were beyond their control. Labouring opportunities were subject to the needs of the rural employers, rather than the compulsions of the farm workers families. Despite their dislike for old work relations with the sahuks, labouring people especially despise landed village families who try distance themselves from village affairs. Landed people with educational capital and other forms of extra village connection with the political and administrative structures are expected to play certain useful roles in the village society. The village headman family is frequently the focus of criticism because of their failure to perform this role as a patron and a broker for development programs or taking up political leadership as panchayat head. Sahuks are frequently described as corrupt and miserly people. In negotiation and transaction of wages it the women, mothers or wives of the labouring men who collect and negotiate wages with the sahuks or ask for cash advances.

Chapter 8: 'Birth of Girls foretells Better times': Gender and Poverty

Engaged in an endless stream of activities that involve intense manual labour, a characteristic feature of Borasambar villages was the prominent visibility of women in areas marked as public spaces. Physical strength and the ability to perform arduous manual work were once considered to be a desirable attribute of women in forest areas. Being a woman also meant that one would support the family through labouring in gender and jati appropriate work. Working with family men to clear land and cultivate crops did not however give women rights over that preciously guarded resource, the land of the jama or male agnatic kin. At the same time women derived a strong sense of identity and selfhood from their livelihoods that involved forests, farms and markets. Gender ideology of the rural society at present devalues manual work and association with the forested past in comparison to domesticity and non-manual work, education and related notions of femininity. Based on these notions women are often evaluated as less civilized and backward and the taken for granted aspects of women's work, expressive traditions, ways of dressing and manner of comportment are scrutinised and found problematic. At the same time the necessity for women to support their families meant that women are expected to take on unprestigious work refused by men. Women's social roles and work are reframed as compulsions of poverty, performing which demonstrated and compounded their subordinate status. The objective of this final chapter of the thesis is to understand and examine how women narrated their experiences of poverty within and through the contradictory conceptions of gender in the local society that restricted their access to valuable resources and redefined things that were of value to them. Women's narratives reveal the disproportionate amount of hardship borne by them in the context of poverty and how being women they were more vulnerable to poverty through their restricted access to important resources such as land and education.

Gender constitutes a key dimension of social inequality, a way of signifying power (Scott 1988:42) and a 'structuring category', 'a form of habitus' that produces and negotiates patterns within social and cultural life' (Fernandes 1997:11). Gender, moreover shapes and differentiates the social processes that create poverty (Razavi

2000). It is also a socially constructed category that requires specification within any given context (Moore 1988:192). Moving away from cross cultural analysis of patriarchy and from notions of a female identity or the interests of women, feminists display increased attention towards the active creation and recreation of women's needs or concerns and complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class (Barrett and Phillips 1992:7). In this context women's memories and narratives acquire great significance as these underscores the social construction of the meaning of self and identities within limits set by the structures of power and domination in a given society (Abu-Lughod 1990, Fernandes 1997:137). Understanding the gendered dimension of the social world of rural western Orissa is essential for a more complete analysis of the nature and meaning of marginality. Exploring women's poverty experiences and the legitimation of these experiences reveal how dominant ideologies of caste and gender intertwined in the local society, diminish women's symbolic resources and how women constructed their identities and viewed their needs, concerns and interests within this framework.

Accounts of village women's about work, property, jati and village life that underscored their assigned roles in the agrarian society that mediated their experience of poverty is especially relevant in a context like India where widespread gender disparity is reflected in terms of the differential survival chances of women and men measured in terms of their health, nutrition and life span. (Dreze and Sen 2004:338). The authors identify this issue as 'a problem of basic inequality ...of extraordinary proportions' (ibid:339). Purely materialist analysis is insufficient for the understanding of women's marginal status in particular societies at a given historical time. In recent times women's subordination in India has been described as 'essentialized discourse' (Raheja and Gold 1994). Women have been shown both to have greater agency than previously assumed (ibid), and despite their apparent freedom subject to various forms of subordination (Unithan-Kumar 1997). Drawing insight from these studies that highlight unlikely agency as well as multiple forms of subordination, in this chapter, marginality is explored through the assumptions and experiences of gender, that offers a different route into the pathways of the past associated with the discourse of hunger and forest dwelling and the present that is described through metaphors of disorder and freedom.

8.1 A Working Woman from Mahulkonda

Anusuya, a woman in her forties, is one of the most experienced kuchnia or woman market-trader in Mahulkonda. Her mother also did similar work. Anusuya uses her small capital to buy things of daily consumption such as vegetables, tobacco, dried shrimps, dried fish, spices, garlic, chillies and children's candy, from the weekly market and sells them in the village. She carried head loads and walked 5 km to the nearby market village every Thursday and took the crowded village jeep to a bigger market every Sunday. Her mother too had been a kuchni trader. At that time there were no shops in the village, which made this work vital. Still Anusuya had a steady batch of customers despite there being several shops in Mahulkonda. Unlike the shops, she accepted rice or paddy as payment, kept smaller value products and never gave goods on credit. Her customers were mainly cash poor cultivators, women and children who shopped tiny amounts on a daily basis and paid in measures of rice or husked rice. Often she could accumulate a small stock of rice. Although this was never large enough to start a sahuvari business, she had said laughing. Sometimes women would request small loans of rice from her in summer. Trading of all kinds is not incompatible with women's work in Borasambar villages. In Mahulkonda, Kultha women came to trade and exchange farm products like onions with dried mahul and char berries. Similarly women of Tel-pida Teli community roamed villages trading their home-pressed oils with paddy. All women visited the weekly market to buy and sell some quantities of upland produce. But unlike the above, for kuchni workers, trading was the main source of income and this was strongly associated with households in which women were in charge through the untimely death or desertion by men.

Anusuya belonged to an important Kultha jama in the village. But after her father's death, her mother had struggled to feed the small children. They had survived by bringing lag from the Brahman sahuvar family, who was their neighbour. They were not always able to return the grain they had borrowed. This had resulted, one year in her mother having to 'write-away' their garden land along with the brick-lined well that had been constructed by her grandfather. Anusuya's mother had started kuchni work to make ends meet. Widowed women were especially harassed or boycotted

by the agnatic collateral kin of the husband, who wished to resume control over their share of jama land. In their case, the problems were compounded by the fact that Anusuya and her sister had no male siblings. Anusuya's mother was helped through these difficult by her sister's family, who helped them to plough their land, thresh their crop and keep their house in decent repair. Anusuya and her sister had inherited the meagre share of family land but failed to make 'good' marriages.

Anusuya's sister had died a few years into her marriage at childbirth. The widower had then married Anusuya. He had then moved to Mahulkonda to farm his wife's inherited land. But soon after had developed debilitating tuberculosis. Unpleasant village gossips called it divine providence. They had blamed the sisters of immorality, a standard way in which envious agnatic kin vented their grief when women inherited land. After her husband's illness, their farming had suffered. Anusuya had taken up kuchnia work. Times continued to be hard for them. She had given birth to nine children, and six of them had died soon after birth. When her seventh child was born, Anusuya following a village custom, had symbolically given her to the washer-man's (dhoba) family. Her daughter, nicknamed 'Dhobein' (washerwoman) and two of her sons born after her had survived. Later, like other villagers, their family too had scraped small gains from the coming of irrigation, public welfare and migrant income. Anusuya alone among village Kultha women migrated to the canal for seasonal wage work.

Among her kin and other Kulthas in the village Anusuya's family has a low status. Her family members were frequently asked to 'help' with random unpaid household chores and agricultural work by wealthier members among the kin –group, which she sometimes complied with. Anusuya had sent three of her children, two sons and a daughter till secondary school. She took good care of her daughter, sheltering her from all outdoor work and hoped that being good looking and 'book-educated', she would be able to find a good match. She wished she could build a good house because that made a good impression. Families who were coming to 'see' her daughter were turning away after looking at their dilapidated house, thinking that she wouldn't be able to afford those things that they all wanted, 'television, punkha, cooler, gold'. And they would be right, she had muttered, she didn't have that kind of money. She would not sell her meagre 2 acres to marry her daughter, what then

would be left for her sons? It would be best she had said if she could get a strong boy from a poor family to marry her daughter and who would be welcome to come and stay with them.

Kuchnia traders were impoverished women. They were associated with undesirable traits such as outspokenness, economic freedom and licentious conduct. In the past a similar occupation associated with widowed women was called 'kuta-pisa', in which women would parboil and de-husk mounds of paddy or break mahul seeds for sahuksar families for a small share of Paddy. Many women remembered their mothers or mothers in law doing this work. After they had de-husked the paddy, they would also carry it on head-loads to sell it at the weekly village markets. When women pursued such socially marginal and yet independent occupations they were considered not only impoverished but also diminished in respectability. In village beliefs, women's labour was best expended in the fields of the agnatic lineage or of the sahuksars for little or no wages. Anusuya's account highlights the two common and important aspects of poverty experiences of women irrespective of their jati affiliation, physically demanding, low paid work and hurdles over owning agricultural land.

8.2 Women Land Owners: Transgressing Rights

In rural South Asia agricultural land is the principal wealth generating resource and a source of prestige (Agarwal 1995). Most women though experience 'significant barriers to realizing their legal claims in landed property as well as to exercising control over any land that they do get' (Agarwal 1995:12). In a patrilineal context where right over land was determined by kinship structures, the inheritance of land by a woman 'represented an interruption of the ideal of pattern of inheritance of lands by males from males' (Sharma 1980:55). This norm holds even in societies recognized as tribal, (where women have been described as relatively more autonomous), assertion of rights over natal and marital family's land by women is viewed as unacceptable (Furer-Haimendorf, C von. et al 1979, Sundar 1999, Standing 1981, Unnithan-Kumar 1997). Women in India exercise their legal rights over a share of their father's property in certain exceptional circumstances: as

daughters, in the absence of male siblings and as married women, on the death of the husband, more or less as custodians for their sons (Sharma 1984, Agarwal 1995). Similar ideologies of land inheritance have restricted women's abilities to claim and exercise control over land, in Mahulkonda, leading to instability and reduced viability of impoverished families without male household heads. Women's accounts about land and accounts that describe women landowners as morally disruptive reveal a key dimension of local marginality, based on gender that shapes poverty experiences.

In Borasambar villages, narratives about longstanding land dispute within and between kin tend to attribute blame to women. Such discourses are woven around the assumption that women were unsuitable, unworthy and illegitimate owners of land, as compared to the members of the patrilineal kin. However, as discussed in chapter 4, changes in land policies in the nineteenth century created legal property rights and a market in land. This inadvertently resulted in a legal environment for women to inherit land under certain circumstances. Often women found themselves to be temporary right holders to land that were quickly transferred to the zamindar or sold to the emergent headman and sahuikars. When women are held responsible for sparking conflict among brothers or the partition of households and family land, specific details of land transactions also come to the fore. It is usually women's inability to exercise permanent control over land that they obtain or inherit under certain limited circumstances that result in land leasing and sale, resulting in jama land to come to the market.

If we revisit the land dispute discussed in chapter 5, this time from the point of view of the Kaushilya barihen, the maligned widow of the lambardar gountia, it could be argued that, she may have been driven away from the village through the oppressive behaviour of the agnatic kinsmen of the deceased gountia. Descendants of Binjhal gountia family held that being a woman disqualified Kaushilya barihen from holding political office or rights over bhogra land and hence she had no authority to resign those rights. But in the early 20th century, women were recognized as lambardars in Sambalpur district. Indeed, this was an important route through which the Borasambar zamindar freed up villages from the control of Binjhal headman clans. By recognizing women's right to inherit and resign the headman's office and

compensating them for their efforts by giving them replacement land in other villages. Indirectly, this strategy supported the policy of expanding cultivation and generating revenue through settling social groups who were considered more capable of spearheading this process and for the increasingly powerful zamindar to get rid of troublesome kin.⁹¹ Apart from the Mahulkonda incident, I heard several other stories, in which Binjhal women had played a role in dispute around headmanship. In one case, the collateral kin of the headmen had prevented the zamindar's men from taking over the village Bhogra. In retaliation the zamindar had imprisoned them. While the men were away in prison, the Binjhal women had been pressured and scared by the administration to 'sign away' the land rights. In some stories, related by women, a more positive role is etched. When the Binjhal headman of a large and fertile village had lost his position through his failure to fill the *malguzari* in time, his wife who was distantly related to the zamindar family had been able to persuade the zamindar to give them a smaller, less fertile village.

Despite these accounts that highlight the role of women in important land transaction at the turn of the last century, women did not gain exceptional powers to circumvent the ideology of male inheritance to stake claim over agricultural land. However small possibilities were created in the spaces between legal titles, inter clan competitions and saleability of land in the locality. But even if they obtained rights, pressed between unhappy agnates and land hungry *Sahukars*, widowed women without sons or daughters without male siblings often sold rather than cultivated the land. Those who chose not to sell or surrender their claims and to whose accounts the discussion now turns experienced severe mental and physical hardship and sometimes numerous forms of social castigation. In the land scarce village where the entire population was dependent on agriculture and land shares that got smaller in every generation, transfer of land through the illegitimate agency of women was a socially acceptable way to vent ones' ire, though land sales happened more frequently through men. When land is lost due to women claiming inheritance the criticism is intense and the plight of young widowed women scrambling to maintain their families

⁹¹ An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the situation in nineteenth century Punjab, where the colonial administration had supported the custom of levirate unions, to ensure that the control of land and the sexuality of women remained firmly under the control of agnatic kin groups (Chowdhry 1996:73). In *Borasambar* zamindari, where levirate unions were not uncommon, the effort was to weaken clan control and allow the free play of competition over land and *malguzari* right, by supporting women to seek protection with the state against and outside agnatic groups.

while fending off the pressure on them to give up their land rights is a common enough story in the village.

In the past young widows were encouraged to leave their marital homes, often leaving their children behind to contract new marriages and the land share of the deceased man reverted to his collaterals (fathers, father's brothers, brothers or brothers' sons, father's brother's sons). A Binjhal woman, Chandra (40 years), related her own experiences to me. In the mid 1980s, Chandra's husband died unexpectedly of cerebral malaria. They had been married only for four years and she had two small children. She was young, strong and beautiful then and '*her tattoo stood out brightly*' as they say to describe youth in the old fashioned Binjhal way. Soon after her mother in law, with whom she had got along reasonably well till then, had started frequent fights. According to Chandra, her in laws had wanted her to leave, marry again to make her home elsewhere. They wanted her to give up the claim on the small parcel of land that was her husband's share. She had taken their abuse but had refused to leave. The next twenty years had been spent struggling to make ends and bring up her sons.

Chandra told me that she had never wished to marry again. She did not think of going back to her natal village. Her parents were already dead their land was equally meagre. Her brother had his own large family to feed. She had like other women landowner's leased out the best part of their land share, the bahal duli –for many years. To ensure that the rights came back to them, she had leased the fields to non-lineage household in the village. This long-term lease had fetched her a small income annually. Within the larger family, this became another source of ill feeling. Rightfully such land should be leased only to family members, the brothers who had a legitimate share – bhag/hissa).⁹² Chandra told me that in 2003, the long lease would finally come to an end. Her sons were old enough to resume cultivation on their father's land. Through the long difficult years when her children were still young, Chandra had received support from other women in the family. Her husband's second brother's wife had helped to care for her children while she would be away

⁹² See Parry (1979:167) who has pointed out a similar belief in Kangra where widows could mortgage the land only temporarily, to meet socially approved needs such as life cycle rites and preferably only to right-holder or hukdars who were next in line for inheritance.

with the migrant labour in the canal. Older women spoke about Chandra's great beauty, hard working nature and high moral character and how she had become an old woman before her time. In general widowed women raising sons and managing land on their behalf becomes more acceptable to villagers over time. When sons grow into adulthood and resume control over their father's land, the anomalous period when women had controlled land comes to an end and order is restored.

An older Binjhal woman Parbati had told me her mother's story from the early 1950s. Her father had died of small pox. She and her three sisters were very small. Her mother, she said could have gone to 'make a new house', but she had been discouraged by her brother who had reminded her of the small children who needed caring. Her maternal uncle had supported them through their hard times, bringing them paddy (adia-kharcha) when needed and helping them to plough their land. Since their land was reasonably fertile 'bahal', in good years, they would get paddy enough to last them 8-9 months. Parbati had emphasized throughout her narrative, their close association with the maternal uncles' household. Remarriages by widows, though not unusual in the past was not a simple matter of choice. Usually some form of external support usually from the women's natal kin, fathers and brothers was essential if it had to take place. Very few widowed women who had young children and some land, opted for remarriage. A Goud man, Narottamo told me how after his father's death when he was only three years old, his mother had not remarried. She too had received some help from her natal kin for ploughing. However their best field, like Chandra's was leased out for many years and the fact that he and his mother had been migrating to the canal since he was seven years old, indicated that the support they received was limited.

Widowhood was not a desirable status for women. And yet the fact that younger women since the nineteen eighties were willing to remain widows by foregoing the option of re-marriage may have had some relationship with absence of family support as well as with the rise of Brahmanical beliefs that stigmatized 'free-choice' and secondary marriages for women as immoral. Despite this when young widows contracted second marriages, it showed the strength and clout of her natal kin and often the relative poverty of the grooms' family. Evidence from Mahulkonda suggests that it was difficult for young widowed women to find good matches in the 1970s and

1980s. When Mohano, from an impoverished jama had married his own maternal uncles' young widowed daughter, it had led to a massive uproar in his family. His mother had thrown the young couple out of the house and refused them a share of the family land. But throughout his life Mohano had received economic support, from his wife's relatively well to do brothers. But widowed women often did not make very good second matches. Jibano, a seventy year old man from a relatively well to do Haldiya Teli family told me how his daughter Rebati was widowed within a year of her marriage when her husband had died of snake bite. He could not reconcile with his daughter's misfortune and had decided to find her a young man as husband. Rebati married again to a young, landless man. The young couple were given a small field by Jibano and settled in Mahulkonda. Relations have already soured between Rebati and her brother over the field that had been gifted to her.

Compared to widows with sons, daughters inheriting land in the absence of male siblings was an even more contentious issue and often earned the concerned women and families women, lifelong ill will. Nevertheless daughters inheriting and staking their claim on land, in the absence of male siblings was an established phenomenon. Several families cultivated land that had been inherited by their mothers from their fathers or even their mothers. Not all daughters, (such as in the Kallar jama story in chapter 4) sold their inherited land. Similar to Anusuya, many marry men from poorer landless families who come to live in their wife's village. This strategy enables the women to overcome the problem of farming in the face of village prejudice and solve the problem of ploughing labour, although it diminished their own status. It had been standard practise for many Mahulkonda men, of impoverished jama to move to their wife's village if there was land. While bringing a husband enabled the families to support themselves better, it did not settle the claims of agnates. Khiro the only daughter of a Kultha family told me how after her father's death, her father's brother had made trouble about last rites. Since Khiro's paternal uncle lived in another village, his claims had not received support from village people. The village and jati people had ruled that she could do the last rites for her father. Her uncle had left and they had sold their paddy to give a feast to the community. But year after year, till his death, Khiro's uncle had tried to rake trouble over the fields that were supposed to be in his name.

Not all widowed women were impoverished. Sometimes widowed women have inherited a great deal of land after the death of their husbands. In case of a Haldiya Teli family in Mahulkonda this had happened through the fortuitous coincidence of being married in a landed family with no co-sharers in a particular branch. In another case a Brahman widowed woman was managing her considerable land with the help of her two unmarried daughters while her sons had left the village to settle in urban centres. These were sahuakar families that could afford to employ farm servants and wageworkers and there were no overt disputes or discussions about the legitimacy of their land rights. But in village gossip, these women were discussed endlessly, their every action was scrutinised and aspersions were cast on their virtues and morals. In early 2000, the marriage expenses of one of the granddaughters in the Haldiya Teli family had resulted in her grandmother selling one of the best bahal fields to a village family from the dalit jama. In the context of high competition over such fields, disappointed groups had indulged in some predictably vicious gossip about the morals of the family that is run by troupe of widowed women. Being wealthy empowered women to control their land better, especially if they had added weapons of caste status, social connections and educational capital. Their situation was clearly not comparable to the impoverished women struggling to feed their children. Yet it did not protect them from the symbolic chastisement and the vague threats of violence from the village community. Prejudices against widows inheriting land, had become a framework with which disgruntled village families would vent their envy of the apparent mobility experienced by similarly situated others. Villagers had nothing good to say about the widow of an erstwhile government employee. They would say that her husband had committed suicide after a fight with her, and that she how she had built a concrete house after his death, living off his pension and setting herself up in style employing haliyas. She also said things like the widow slept with all kinds of men, not of her jati and had killed all the children resulting from those unsavoury unions.

It was perhaps not just a coincidence that the only person certified to be practising witchcraft (tonhai) in the village was an elderly widow with a daughter.⁹³ Ahalya (roughly 60 years) told me how her first her husband and then her son had died of

⁹³ Her reputation was so petrifying that my research assistant refused to accompany me to her house and warned me repeatedly against accepting and drinking tea in their house.

tuberculosis. He had suffered for two months in different hospitals, from Padampur to Burla but had died in the end. Characteristically her husband's brothers refused to give her a share of land and had nearly thrown her out of the village. It was Ahalya's daughter, once she grew up, who had suggested that they should seek legal opinion. Five or six years after they had filed the case, the verdict was given in her favour and they had got back some fields. Now, Ahalya's daughter, son in law and granddaughter lived with her and cultivated their land. Witches or tonhai in western Orissa villages were not necessarily women, or people of subordinate caste groups or associated with land disputes. However women who were viewed as outspoken, quarrelsome or mysterious, or if they live in close vicinity of some families who have been repeatedly sick, coupled with some serious ill will spread by kinsmen, had a strong chance of attaining this disreputable status. Most witch- accusations were in the realm of rumour and witches were at present left alone and not tormented but they were observed constantly and the latent threat of violence was always there.

Mahulkonda village accounts of women land owners and accounts given by the women villagers indicate the complexity of practises on the ground that are underpinned by material interests but also produced by cultural assumptions about gender. Women operated within the interstices of these structural conditions that produced and were produced by their symbolic subordination and material poverty not only with respect to powerful land controlling men, such as the zamindar, the manipulative sahumars or their own relations, brothers, husbands, sons and others, who formed the legitimate members of agnatic kin group, but also socially supported attitudes that made women exercising agency with respect to land, outside the apparent edifice of patrilineal structure as immoral. One of the ways in which women obtained limited right in lineage resources was through marriage. The strategies of marriages however have been changing as Mahulkonda villagers aspire for greater status and respect and emulated the lifestyle of the Brahman sahumars.

8.3 Captured Brides: Conversations about Marriages

Among the stranger stories that were circulating in the village in the summer of 2003, were the ones in which people from elsewhere were described as coming to western

Orissa to look for brides. There were rumours of that huge sums of money were being paid to their families. Poor families with many daughters were succumbing to the generous offers being made by these strangers, hailing from regions unknown and speaking in different languages. The responses to such reports were mixed. Some thought it was a good thing countering the trend of high 'joutuk' or demands of dowry; others expressed their doubts and apprehension about the authenticity of such marriages. Why, I had asked them, would men from distant places come so far to look for brides? Several women had replied as follows: *'perhaps because in their country, they had killed all the girl children by 'computer checking', so young men could not find girls to marry. In our country on the other hand there were more girls, so they came here'*. When many girl children were born to village families in 2003, someone had mentioned an old saying: *'(Tookel hele samaya hesi) or the birth of girls, bring good times.'* I was told that in such years it always rained well and crops were plentiful. Such expressions rested, diminished and marginal alongside other disquieting discussions about the burden of daughters, expenses of dowries and scandals of female infanticide.

Village women often discussed how important sahuakar families of the past were fast losing their fortunes not through droughts, land partitioning or cost of labour, but through the high expenses of marrying their daughters. Such households took great pains in trying to obtain high status matches for their daughters and waited long till they found the right family. As a result more girls from these wealthy families stayed unmarried for long periods of time, while cost of marriages rose. Suitable matches implied that the groom must be at least a college graduate, came from a landed family and in addition engaged in non-farm salaried employment. These aspirations held greatest salience for the erstwhile wealthy sahuakar and gountia families but village community in general were also affected by this trend since they disliked viewing themselves as any less than the notable people in their society. Not being able to obtain such matches created a sense of marginality among the younger women and village families, since it underscored their low status. However pressures were far greater for women who belonged to sahuakar families and wealthier jati groups. In the village, tall young women wearing long print frocks as against the standard sari marked the candidates who were waiting to find the right match. But women say that this phenomenon was a fairly recent development. In the past,

marriages were not linked to such stringent criteria and did not involve competitive spending.

In the past, most village marriages were based on the payment of a standard and negotiable bride-price amount. In anthropological literature of India, such transactions are associated with poverty and low status of social groups or adivasi communities (Karve 1965, Sharma 1984). Among the standard transactions that took place during past marriages whatever the social status or group of the people concerned, was the payment of a bride price by the groom's family. The bride's family (tookel-ghar) provided the household equipment consisting of bell metal vessels, silver jewellery and a village feast. In this exchange, people said, it was the groom's family (pila-ghar) that would bear the heavier financial burden.

Many Binjhal men have discussed the long years they had to wait before they could marry and how fields had to be mortgaged or money borrowed from sahuakar families, to pay the bride-price amount. All jati groups except the Brahmans paid bride price and the rates were standardized with an increasing trend in the period before the mid 1980s.⁹⁴ Marriage ceremonies were pared down and simple. On the day of the ceremony, the bride was simply brought to the groom's village by her family members with the household equipment and accompanied by village musicians (sajo-bajo). Feasts were rarely held and village people were called home and given rice sweets or sweetened flat rice (liya). Such marriages were called 'bandhen kanya' (captured or bound-bride) and women tended to say in 2002-03 that these were not 'real marriages'. The declining prestige of such marriages was associated with the negative evaluation of bride price payments in the local society.

By the early 1980s such customs were on the decline. When I had asked Bhanu, a Binjhal woman from the old gountia family about bride price she had said that her family had not wanted to take money. Her father had said that it was like 'selling your daughter' and they had taken kaptas (saris) instead. Whitehead (1984:188-189)

⁹⁴ Phulo a kultha woman who had been married in the early 1970s, told me that she had been married for Rs.150 and jewellery. Her aunt who had been married a decade earlier, for Rs.120 and gold and silver jewellery. Another 60 year old woman, Usha from a Goud family had told me that they had 'brought her' with Rs.120 bride price, 3 saris and two gold earrings. Usha's daughter (40 year) told me that she had been married for Rs.240 and they gave her silver jewellery while her father gavethem khuri-ghina – (kitchen vessels). For marriages in the late 1970s, higher bride price payments (Rs.500-700) had been made.

argues that in bride-wealth paying societies women are considered to be equivalent to other forms of transactions involving objects or material things and in such cases *'women may appear to be property.'* Mahulkonda villagers appear to have made a similar connection. Some older women described how they had felt less like brides and more like cattle with the heavy silver khagla and the weighted anklets around their legs. Padma (60 years) a Binjhal woman told me how her maternal grandmother used to wear a silver khagla around her neck. Once she had put it around Padma's neck and asked how she liked it. Padma said she had felt that she had turned into a cow or a plough bull. Moreover when they worked from dawn to dusk, in the fields, their resemblance to labouring cattle was further established. Various jati samaj or caste societies were also actively propagating against bride price, remarriage of widows and prevalent forms of ornamentations like tattooing at this time. For the Binjhals, a circle of tattooing around the ankles had been an essential identity marker for women without which no Binjhal girl would have obtained a match. But tattooing was declared as a backward practise and prohibited by their jati samaj in the 1980s. In Mahulkonda, all married Binjhal women had the characteristic band of tattoos around their ankle but the younger girls neither desired, nor required to obtain these.⁹⁵

By the early 1990s, the custom of bride price had been eased out with payments of 'joutuk' or dowry taking its place. The latter associated in the past with high status and educated Brahman families had gradually seeped into the practises of all village people. A related development has been increased in the general cost of marriages, (which were in any case high relative to incomes), asymmetric distribution of this burden to the bride's family and the competitive search for prestigious matches with the underlying objective of seeking physical and metaphorical distance from forest areas. Contracting prestigious marriages have gained impetus through the emergence of a few well to do families among all social groups who were greatly concerned about their status and used the urban and Brahmanical frame of reference. The expense of 'joutuk' or dowry was a common subject matter of

⁹⁵ According to the early twentieth century treatise on the castes and tribes of Central Provinces: 'Every Binjhar woman is tattooed either before or just after her marriage, when she has attained to the age of adolescence. A man will not touch or accept food from a woman who is not tattooed on the feet...On the chest and arms the patterns are in the shape of flowers and leaves while along the leg a succession of zig zag lines are pricked.' (Russell and Hiralal 1916:335-336)

conversation and constant source of agony not just in the sahuakar families but even among poorer families giving rise to ambivalent narratives about the less prestigious but also less burdensome past.

A Kallar family that was planning to marry their daughter in 2004 had called me to show the 'joutuk' that they had been collecting: steel cupboard from Padampur shop, a television set, wooden furniture and the mandatory motorcycle. Another wealthy farming family from the Haldiya Teli community, who had married their daughter in 2001, told me that they had spent Rs.300000 and given everything, 'bicycle, furniture, television set, refrigerator, clothes and jewellery except a motorbike'. The extent of Joutuk and expenditure of marriage ceremonies increased with the status and resources of the groom's household. Competitive spending around marriages that consisted of 'joutuk' payment, marriage processions (bar-jatri) with a band and village wide feast was still considered to be unaffordable by village families.

Bibhishan, (50 year) dalit man had said that he felt thankful all his three daughters had been married before the custom of 'joutuk' had become popular in their area. In 2003, a marriage in the dalit jama had fallen through after the father, a better off family within the jama, had refused give in to the excessive demands of cash as 'joutuk'. Paloki, a Binjhal woman told me that she had not brought anything on her sons' marriages because she did not like to enjoy unearned wealth. Another Binjhal woman told me how she worried about her daughter's marriage. *'You have seen the kind of things they wanted nowadays. How would I afford it?'* Her solution was: *'to bring a young, strong man for my daughter, to live with us. I cannot bear to live away from my daughter.'* Such practises, people said were introduced by the Brahman families in the area, in whose marriage gifts, the villagers saw the first bicycles and later the first television sets. Villagers sometimes described with glee the plight of once powerful sahuakar families who were now depleted by the marriage expenses of his many daughters.

Poorer families continued to follow older transaction patterns whenever they could by offering bride price, brass vessels and some jewellery, and whatever little extra they could afford. The most expensive component to be provided by the bride's family the bell metal vessels was obtained through contributions made by friends and family

members and detailed lists about these reciprocal transactions were maintained. Despite this, 'joutuk' demands were becoming pervasive and difficult to avoid. For his daughter's marriage in 2002, Mohano, a Telpida Teli man told me how the groom had wanted Rs.5000. Mohano had complained that the boy wasn't doing much and they didn't even have any land but in the end he had gone ahead with the marriage. He had consoled himself by thinking that the groom was at least young and strong and if nothing else could do wage work to feed his family. Villagers often remarked that it was a practise that had arrived to blight them in their poor backward forest region like other exploitative customs from the 'developed' plains.

Women often remarked upon the convenience and ease of obtaining suitable matches for daughters in the past, but marriages systems and transactions of the past were not necessarily evaluated as better compared to the present. '*Back then,*' as a village woman had put it, '*no girl was left behind then because she was short or tall or fair or dark. It was the groom's family ('pila ghar') who came looking – they were under great pressure – it was they who had to perhaps sell or mortgage their land when they got married.*' Women had travelled less distance from their natal homes and marriages were fixed within familiar and related families and kin groups. In the past brides had come from among the children of maternal uncles, paternal aunts and maternal aunts. Jamuna told me how she had preferred to get her brothers' daughter as a bride for her son. Her daughter in law and niece confessed to me the shame she had felt to be married to a person with whom she had played as a child, though she had reconciled to it eventually. Such marriages would usually take place if the concerned families were equally situated. The trend at present was to seek brides and grooms who were unrelated by ties of kinship and from distant villages, as one went further to the east, towards more fertile villages or irrigated areas or administrative headquarters or towns, marriages increased in prestige and as one went further into forested villages of Borasambar, marriages were considered less prestigious and less expensive. However while men even if they were not very well settled could find matches from more developed villages, women even if they were from high status jati often have to move towards less developed forest villages. This pattern of movement is reflected in the concerns voiced by in-marrying women.

For Binodini, a Brahman woman, who had completed her matric school education in the 1980s, getting married even in a sahuakar family of Mahulkonda had meant a great deal of what she described as 'adjustment'. She had complained how her: *'mother's home was also village, but it was an 'educated' village. I used to find this a 'jangli' gaan – wild village, forest village.'* Such concerns becoming mainstream and Mahulkonda girls of all jati groups, who had moved to relatively interior villages after their marriage expressed similar feelings of social decline. In 2003, a girl from a Goud jati, who had been married the year before, had referred to her sas ghar (mother in law's village) as a backward place full of forests, poor agriculture, no education and where people spent their entire days roaming around in the forest.

Women remembered important events of the recent past through their marriage and the birth of their children. Some would say, *'the year I married, the next year they dug up the foundation for the mahaprabhu temple.'* Or the year they married, there was a big (pain-chad) rain failure and the paddy was lost. Through marriages they expressed their friendship and camaraderie with other women by remembering how they had all been married in the same year. When older women spoke about marriage they also referred to the typical adornment of married women of the past. Pointing to their nose, ears, arms and feet they would recite the names of the typical jewellery that they or others had worn – three types of ear rings: gathia, phasia, jhalka, two kinds of nose rings: nak putki, guna, bracelets and arm bands: bahsuta, tar, katria, bandhria, a heavy silver necklace: khagla and the anklets: poinri-paijal. Such resplendent brides and married women of the past were often contrasted to the present day brides, book-learned (path-poda) and delicate like the few light gold jewellery they wore. Through vivid descriptions of ornaments and dressing styles women evoked the nostalgic past of their youth, the times of deep forests, huge grain stores, hardworking people and great hunger and expressed their ambivalence about the new standards of beauty, femininity and requirements that have emerged in the local society, that seem to promise them greater respect but simultaneously diminished and devalued what or how they were at present.

Early in the evening, when women can be seen sitting on their house fronts with their mirrors, oil bottles and combs to dress and tidy themselves and their children, village girls can be seen anointing themselves with the locally sold 'fairness cream'. Older

unmarried girls waiting for prospective marriage proposals wore shop bought long print dresses. Older women said that there were far more demand for girls, in the past. In those days, it didn't matter how one looked or what was the colour of their skin or how educated they were as long as they were strong, healthy and could work hard, they would find a match. Ideas of beauty and personal adornment were different. In contrast, the adolescent girls in the village agonized about their looks especially the colour of their skin, contrasting themselves not with their mothers but with city girls, who they said were very fair because they always stayed in shade, away from the hot sun and kept cool by their ceiling fans and refrigerators. The new criteria of beauty, that pressed on younger women, were not supported by economic prosperity that ensured that girls were no longer compelled to work in the fields, forests, on looms or as migrant agricultural labour, like their mothers and grandmothers. Changes in marriage transactions and evaluative standards have affected how women saw themselves and what they viewed as the desirable status if not for them but for their daughters. But this has not been accompanied by widespread seclusion or withdrawal of women from traditional occupational roles. Labouring is no longer viewed as an appropriate role for women of any social group, but in impoverished families women continue to bear the burden of economic reproduction through labouring while suffering a set back in contracting marriages (see Sharma 1984).

While some new economic opportunities have become available for women through the reservation of government jobs, and increasing access to education has meant that, some women even from non-elite jati groups could find employment as school teachers or in lower level government departments, a majority toiled harder than ever on established routes of wage work. Indeed women from many previously well to do farming families had taken to seasonal migration for wage labour. In a region where people could not survive without women's labour, the availability of pre-natal sex selection techniques were being utilized by wealthier families to prevent the birth of girls. Stories and rumours about 'computer checking' referred to the growing practise of female foeticide prevalent among wealthy, 'modern' and 'educated' families through the use of ultrasound technology. Clearly these families had moved the farthest from the belief encapsulated in the village proverb with which the chapter begins that the birth of girls foretold good times.

8.5 Expressive traditions: Can educated girls sing and dance?

*You yam on pumpkin leaves /Why were you born a man
If only to bow to a woman / come dalkhai friends*

The above is a song from a genre called dalkhai, a ritual of song and dance, that unmarried women of Mahulkonda and its neighbouring region had practised in the forest, during autumn, in the month of Dashera (October), after the harvest of upland crops. In this song, the women are taunting and daring men through the suggestive metaphor of the yam growing on pumpkin leaves. During my fieldwork, I was asked by one of the younger educated village men whether I would like to visit a forest village in Patna to see young women sing and dance the dalkhai. The same person had been rather taken aback on my asking him whether a similar tradition had also existed in Mahulkonda and Borasambar. He had replied in the negative. Later I had asked older village women about dalkhai and had received a variety of opinions. Mahulkonda was once as famous for its dalkhai dances, as it was for its hunt parties. But the tradition had faded away along with many other ritualised song and dance genres like dond, sajani geet, and haliya geet, homo, rasar keli and karma. Dalkhai was specifically associated with young unmarried women and had been prohibited by the village committee sometime during the 1980s. The end of dalkhai songs and dance was an important indicator that Borasambar was emerging from its forested past, towards an idiosyncratic modernity. The articulation of community honour through the apparent protection of women's sexuality is a nationalist narrative that has been used to shape the experience of countless communities and places in post-independent India.

At the time of Dashera, groups of village women would go to the forest accompanied by the village musicians. After performing a number of rituals by the bank of the stream and they would sing and dance the dalkhai. It was customary for groups of men from neighbouring villages to come and watch and join in the spontaneous song making, that consisted of quick repartees and dancing. Older women, who had performed the dalkhai dance in their youth, were extremely reluctant to talk about it. Any mention of dalkhai on my part would result in a great deal of hushing and

shushing and references to 'what will people say' and 'my husband, or son, or father in law was at home, the shame of it'. Clearly dalkhai was associated not just with a retrograde practise of the past that has been simply forgotten but a tradition that was shameful and must be erased from memory.

Many women said that the household men must not know or must not hear any references to dalkhai. In one sense this was convention as dalkhai dance was considered to be a private, women's affair, conducted by women in the forest. The men from the village were forbidden to watch while men from other villages would come to watch and sometimes joined in the performances by responding to the taunting rhymes of the women with their own impromptu songs. Many women had described such practises as bad and shameful. When I asked Bhanu, Binjhal woman, about whether she knew dalkhai, I had received a strong negative reply. She had said that such dances were 'not good' and she had never danced them although she had seen older girls in her natal village performing when she was small. She did not elaborate why 'dancing was bad'. She however mentioned that Mahulkonda village was once famous for its dalkhai. After many days of persuasion some women had relented and agreed to talk about dalkhai. They remembered many songs and in great secrecy, after ensuring that no male relatives were present had been happy to sing them.

Women had said that the dalkhai dances were like the work that women did: 'we had danced 'luhi, luhi kori' (or bending down again and again). They were surprised when I didn't understand because bending down was so fundamental to women's lives. It was women said like how they planted rice seedlings, searched for weeds, picked mahul flowers or filled their water pots. To demonstrate this some dance steps were shown inside darkened rooms. Initially women ensured that they sang only those songs that had more religious overtones and many were influenced by devotionalist traditions woven around the secret love between Radha and Krishna (Fuller 1992:158). Later, they sang some of the risqué ones. While they enjoyed singing these, assisting each other to remember more lines, they wouldn't allow me to record them. In the empty house in a summer afternoon, they fondly revisited memories of famous dancers, good singers and expert rhymers. The half forgotten songs that were sung had various themes such as description of farming, declaration of love,

Radha's pining for Krishna, plight of women whose husbands brought a new wife, chronicle of births in the village, and many teasing rhymes like the one with which I started the chapter. Some women admitted that for many years they had missed the dancing and how their feet stirred unassisted when they would hear the Dashera drums. The older women and village daughters were less constrained about discussing dalkhai. Younger women knew these dances from the performances of bands of commercial troupes that visited the villages in the festive season.

Why did they discontinue the ritual of dalkhai? Some women had said their Borasambar society had become immoral and disorderly. That times were bad and sometimes girls could run away with strangers. Moreover there were no forests to dance. There had been incidents of women being molested in roadside villages. In one story, lorry drivers had accosted the girl performers of dalkhai and hurt them. The truck drivers had misunderstood or abused the nature of the ritual. Women no longer felt safe in the forest. Older women associated forest as a place where they were comfortable and confident and where they performed rites and had knowledge of the dangers of spirits, ghosts and wild animals. Though 'free choice' marriages and elopements have been associated with singing and dancing performances in the past, forests have also been places of legitimate activities of specially defined people, Binjhals and women. If roads had rendered forests vulnerable, literacy had made communing with forest places inappropriate. Educated girls it was believed would not wish to dance. Mainstream conceptions of gender had been adopted by village society with the increasing emphasis on literacy. The notion that had taken hold was that singing and dancing were not appropriate behaviour for civilised women. Some Mahulkonda women had said, that surely I didn't expect their book-learned girls (path poda tookels) to dance in the forest?

Their ideas of beauty, femininity and entertainment were markedly different. Like tattooing or wearing kaptas or tying their hair in the characteristic bun (khusa) of older women or chewing tobacco, they viewed practises such as dalkhai as archaic and backward. In 2003 I was sometimes given impromptu performances of the latest Oriya film hit songs by little old girls. Dalkhai was identified with a range of practises or traditions associated with all older non-literate women, including their styles of dressing, demeanour or conversation. These characteristics were sometimes

described as a kind of adivasi-ness. On one occasion looking at a photograph that I had taken of a group of laughing Kultha women, sitting in the inner courtyard of their house, a younger man of their family had shook his head and remarked how they all looked like adivasi women. Dancing was increasingly associated with a stereotypical and pejorative understanding of the tribal or adivasi, erasing the diversity of local distinctions and meanings in practises of women who lived in forest areas.

The broader region of Chattisgarh and Sambalpur is well known for its expressive traditions and genres of song and dance though largely excised from everyday lives and found as a generic folk tradition in television, films and musical-theatre (jatra) troupes. Flueckiger (1996:50), with whom the villagers of Phuljhar (ex-zamindari contiguous to Borasambar) had discussed the discontinuation of dalkhai, argues that the reason why traditions such as dalkhai had been labelled bad and discontinued by villagers was because the meaning of the songs had been altered once these were taken out of their traditional context for commercial uses. However the Chattisgarhi villagers had insisted like Mahulkonda women that it was inappropriate for their educated girls to perform or practise dalkhai (Flueckiger 1996:56). In her analysis, Flueckiger (1996:59) had associated dalkhai with adivasi tradition and opposed it to Brahmanical beliefs and attitude. The author situates dalkhai as an adivasi expressive practise as against the patriarchal and Brahmanical tradition of the Chattisgarh region. In this framework, dalkhai appears to question and challenge the existing social order.

But women's expressive traditions from Mahulkonda were not adivasi artefacts that subverted or criticised the hierarchies or divisions of the social order. Instead these were shaped within practises that were considered appropriate and legitimate within non-Brahmanical forms of patriarchy. Women had attributed the restrictions placed on their songs and dances as the sign of changes in times, nature of place and the expectations from women. For them and the village community, roads cutting into forests had symbolized not just improved mobility and progress but also loss of control, that rendered these spaces insecure. As people aspired for newer identities to retain and enhance control over valued resources, women were enmeshed in new forms of symbolic violence. To obtain a good marriage with a higher status spouse, younger women needed to enhance their value as well as their 'inner worthiness'

and this they attained through education and by distancing themselves from the practises of their labouring mothers in every possible way (Ortner 1996). In the context of Mahulkonda village, dalkhai appeared both as an affective though outmoded practise as well as an expression of shame through its association the past of backwardness.

Curtailing women's expressive traditions and describing them as immodest and backward has been one of the commonest practises in many parts of India as people demonstrated their acceptance of nationalist narratives of civilization and modernity (Chatterjee 1990, Bannerjee 1990). According to some authors, the relationship between female virtue and social honour of the group was 'structurally, functionally and symbolically bound up with the historical emergence of systematically stratified state-type structures' and served as the justification for the necessity of 'male protection ad guardianship' (Ortner 1996:47). According to Raheja and Gold (1994:186) women's expressive traditions resisted such dominant discourses. Women's dalkhai dancing was not simply a matter of choice or act of resistance against Brahmanical traditions of modernity but like other practises of the past also associated with other modes of symbolic domination associated with patriarchal forest places. As warned by Abu-Lughod (1990), rich and contradictory stories of resistance tell us more about the complex working of social power and its historical transformations.

8.6 Conclusion: Modes of Subjection

This chapter tries to show how village poverty had specifically gendered causes, effects and pathways. Narratives of women who had struggled to raise their families, who had been unable to farm and worked for starvation wages, because of being restricted from accessing or utilizing vital resources like land, are highly pertinent for the understanding of poverty. Often in these families, mobility had been difficult to achieve and poverty has been transmitted generationally. Even better off families in terms of landholdings have been marginalized under the guardianship of women and in the absence of men. Social disapproval of women who operated as self-sustaining individuals in the absence of men was high. Women's narratives of the past revealed

how the conceptions of gender in the rural social world that legitimized unequal access to land and validated the control of women's labour by patriarchal family heads, led to long-term poverty.

While women seldom managed to assume direct control over farming land due to social disapproval, disputes about land always had the motif of illegitimate agency of women, despite the fact that various dynamics, usually rivalries between social groups, lineages and men were in play. Bernal (1994:55) argues, that in comparatively egalitarian societies inequalities between men cannot be viewed as an aspect of the natural order while inequalities between gender was acceptable. While conflict of interests and competition over land between different classes and lineage groups were generated in the context of agrarian expansion and emergence of property rights in the forest zamindari, viewing land disputes in terms of gender helped to maintain social solidarity and avert gaze from the facts of structural inequalities.

This chapter has also tried to demonstrate how the social construction and conceptions of gender have changed with time without remedying or settling issues of the past as people adopted newer symbols to accommodate and come to terms with their identities and locations within wider social spheres. Processes such as modernity and capitalism, colonialism and nationalism, have been associated with transformation in the relations, concepts and identities of gender. In many parts of India, especially remote, forested places, village people aspire to obtain prestigious identities associated with the local elite as well as the urban people and officials from elsewhere, whom they encounter frequently. This is not to suggest that village people were isolated from the wider world in the past but that their identification with valued conceptions outside the immediate social world has grown with their entry into non-farm employment, through education, experiences of labour migration, access to media and most importantly a sense of equality that had emerged through their association with the state.

The notion of ideal womanhood that emerges from these experiences and understandings is far removed from the realities and practices of the lives of a majority of village women and the economic compulsions of village families. Patterns

of livelihoods and dependence on the farming economy have not changed. Secluding women at home or restricting them from participating in labouring are not viable options, if families were to sustain themselves. The earnings and labour contribution of women remain as central to village lives as in the past. Indeed, women from many previously self-sustaining farming families including younger women, who have obtained secondary school education, perform agricultural labour or migrate for wage work. While the acceptance and self-evident nature of women's labouring role has declined, there was a distinct 'feminization' of labour in the village as men sought higher paid labouring options outside the village.

Devaluation of women's roles and work, and emphasizing different concepts of femininity, propriety, modesty, beauty and virtuous conduct suggest the emergence of a new patriarchal ideology that becomes relevant in the local society through the practices of the elite from all caste groups and its emulation by others. The new sahumkar families' economic and symbolic resources were not just about grain stores but also the non-labouring lives of educated and delicate, housebound women of these families. The perception of such women as respectable, intelligent and virtuous is contrasted with the loud talking, hard working women of the village, who signify the discredited past of forest dwelling and the moral inferiority associated with such lifestyles. Its best manifestation can be seen in the prohibition of women's expressive traditions, changing attires, increasing investment in marriages outside the locality, preoccupation with the colour of the skin and in extreme cases the practice of female infanticide. Women's subordination once linked to their intrinsically different but valuable role in the agrarian society was critically rephrased through the perception about their strong association and attachment with the discredited traditions of the forested, adivasi pasts.

Chapter 9: Concluding Arguments

'As long as men were content with their rustic huts, as long as they confined themselves to sewing their garments of skin with thorns or fish-bones, and adorning themselves with feathers or shells, to painting their bodies with various colours, to improving and decorating their bows and arrows; and to using sharp stones to make a few fishing canoes or crude musical instruments; in a word, so long as they applied themselves only to work that one person could accomplish alone and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived as free, healthy, good and happy men so far as they could be according to their nature and they continued to enjoy among themselves the sweetness of independent intercourse; but from the moment one man needed the help of another, and it was found to be useful for one man to have provisions enough for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became necessary, and vast forests were transformed into pleasant fields which had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and flourish with the crops.' (Rousseau 2003:115-116)

In the discourse of inequality, Rousseau describes the once free and satiated inhabitants of forest paradise becoming enslaved through the transformation of forests into fields. He ascribes their descent into misery to slavery, labouring and dependence on one another that emerges through the introduction of the concept of property and the practise of agriculture. This powerful image and point of view about forest areas appear time and again as a foil to highlight the extent and nature of transformation that had taken place in forest areas of India with the establishment of modern state during the period of British colonial rule and through the post colonial period. In the scholarship about adivasi or tribal people, forest places appear plentiful and resource rich before their despoliation by extractive and predatory outsiders.

Can such broad narratives of transformation help us to understand the poverty of the Binjhals and others, the erstwhile forest dwelling people of Borasambar? Had they as inhabitants of forest areas lived in plenty before becoming the impoverished victims of the inexorable external forces of capitalism and colonialism? These

questions are shaped by beliefs and attitudes about the historical past and recur time and again, as understanding, remedies and scapegoats are sought for the complex moral, ethical and political dilemmas of the present, among which poverty takes a prominent place. But the pasts of forest areas are far more diverse, complex and difficult to retrieve or understand. Partial, fragmented glimpses of these pasts can be obtained through juxtaposition of interested viewpoints such as the archived documents of British colonial administrators and memories of the descendants of forest dwellers.

Borasambar was a place that had been enclosed in the late medieval period within the dense forests of Gondwana. Even though the area had many kingdoms that were being encircled by Maratha influence (1760s), their reputation of forested inaccessibility, hostile inhabitants, lack of resources and many attendant dangers had discouraged external intervention. When the early colonial administrators ventured into the area (1800s), it had been a political entity nested within the interconnected segmentary kingdoms of the Mahanadi valley area that related to each other through alternating strategies of dissidence and alliance. Binjhals and (far larger, important groups like the Gonds and the Kondhs) were hill dwellers, that had controlled sparsely populated territories and political units through their clan based social organization. Forest dwellers lived under their own rajas, maliks, garhtias and zamindars in the hills and provided military tributes to kingdoms in the valley. In the early nineteenth century they had appeared fairly autonomous politically and resistant to the encroachment of revenue regimes of valley kingdoms and regional states. Using the inhospitable terrains of hills and forests strategically was one of the ways in which, political entities like Borasambar had remained economically viable and politically relevant. Much of the understanding of this past is obtained from colonial archives and hence is skewed towards the preoccupation of the early administrators, and their struggles to impose order, erect boundaries, enforce treaties and facilitate communication between their own dispersed territories. When forest dwellers appear in these narratives, it is in the well-known guise of 'rebellious subalterns.'

One of the key transformations that emerged through the intervention of early British administration was the de-militarisation of the region through a series of pacification

battles (Padel 2000). In the Sambalpur district, important zamindars and rajas were accommodated through the restitution of their kingdoms and their symbolic elevation as little kings. This outcome was shaped by the zamindari rebellion that continued well after 1857 to protest the confiscation by the British of the kingdom of Sambalpur. Through this policy of retaining numerous kings of their small territories, the colonial administration obtained loyal allies. The Binjhals, who had controlled important positions of political authority in pre-colonial Borasambar, were also affected by this dispensation. Recognised as heads of villages, the Binjhals, were briefly, participants in the administration of the zamindari during this era of kingly rule (called 'feudatory' states) under British patronage. The impoverished Binjhal villagers recall this time as their glorious past, continuous with the earlier times when they had fought the Marathas and the distant mythical past when their elders had arrived in Borasambar as migrants, archers or bowmen (bentkar) from the Chattisgarhi kingdoms in the west to find their own kingdom in the forest. The change that took place at this point was significant because it resulted in greater concentration of power in the position of the zamindar and created clearer boundaries between the ruler and the ruled in the zamindari areas. Later, a specific pattern of social hierarchy emerged in the forest zamindaris, between the wealthy and symbolically elevated Brahmanical zamindar and his impoverished, adivasi subjects.

British administrators had distrusted the Binjhals, describing them as savage hill dwellers and in later census reports as primitive forest tribes or 'aboriginals'. The positions of headmanship that the Binjhals had been allowed to retain had been from the beginning a political compromise and very soon administrators were rueing their decision. The Binjhals had promised to give up raiding, the practise of shifting cultivation, they had adopted the plough, invited cultivators and dug irrigation tanks, but were still falling back in revenue payments and getting indebted to moneylenders. Their lack of ability as village managers and farmer-landlords was attributed to their 'aboriginal' tendencies. But Borasambar at this time was still depopulated and under the rule of the court of wards (1885-1900). To limit the Binjhals' influence, the strategy that was adopted was to open up the extensive forest areas and settle new revenue villages in the zamindari. For this, the revenue collection rights were sold to the migrants from the valley areas, viewed as peaceful and

respectable hindu castes and who were moreover experienced cultivators and irrigators of upland terrains.

The policy of farming revenue collecting rights to the highest bidder and the fact that Binjhal headmen frequently defaulted on revenue payments, led to the shift of the office of headmanship from the Binjhals to other caste groups in the more fertile areas of Borasambar. But this process began in earnest only from early twentieth century, when the new Binjhal zamindar, selected and educated by the court of wards took up the responsibility of zamindari administration under the supervision of Sambalpur district authorities. For the Binjhals, the memories of past poverty is linked with their loss of village headmanship through a betrayal by their own raja and kinsmen who had become a 'stranger'. In the context when land was more intensively farmed and bound by secure land rights in colonial era Borasambar villages, displaced Binjhal headman lineages could not find cultivation rights as before and had to turn to labouring. Social groups and lineages with secure land rights became the farmers and rural employers. Among these the gountia or the headman families emerged as the most prosperous and powerful through their control of the limited fertile fields and the labour of their praja-subjects and special links with the zamindari administration. A key indicator of local poverty that emerged during this period was the absence of legal title being linked to permanent rights to land that could be bought and sold and inherited. Binjhals despite their early presence in the area had progressively lost access to titled land, partly through the loss of headman-ship offices, and were unable to buy new land through their poverty though they never became completely landless.

Hill areas had not been egalitarian places in the pre-colonial period. As historical scholarship of subaltern groups in central India have amply pointed out, pre-colonial central Indian hill communities consisted of diverse groups of people (Bailey 1957,1960, Arnold1999 [1982], Hardiman 1987,1994, Skaria 1999). Here social hierarchy existed in terms of 'lords' and their dependents. The latter consisted of assorted groups of cultivators, clansmen, herders, traders and artisans. Local elites went by various titles and names that suggested their role as kings, chiefs or lords. These hill rulers controlled small territories and raided the plains or valley areas and defended their territorial boundaries with the help of their clansmen and dependents

and feuded among themselves. The divisions and hierarchies that emerged in the wake of the establishment of British rule and revenue administration were different from the past because it had accommodated the principles of social divisions present in the hill, upon which had grown the caste or jati-based hierarchies of the valley and plains areas introduced by the migrant cultivators, some of whom acquired lordly positions through the purchase of village headmanship.

Colonial administrators viewed the growing dominance of valley area cultivators and Brahmans on the survived old elites in the local society, as positive development. But for the Binjhals in general, one of the past that is remembered is the one in which their jati group had declined in power and had been socially subordinated by groups who had no credentials for their symbolic superiority. All Binjhals agreed that as a social group they had been pushed back and suffered domination, the causal reasons that are given, vary. Some of the Binjhal elites had survived the colonial era with their titles intact. As the emergent political and caste leaders of the society this group argued that it was the Binjhal community's proclivity for the forests, feuding and other archaic, non-Brahmanical practises or collective moral failings that had led to their economic and symbolic losses. Dispossessed Binjhals gave the illegitimate agency of ineligible others, the sahkars (moneylenders and traders) over their resources as the main cause of their poverty. Binjhal subordination in the local society is made self evident through their loss of headmanship, land ownership rights, poverty and most importantly their devalued association with the forests: no longer as rulers or clansmen of rulers but mere foragers, forest clearers and huntsmen, in short as adivasi people. Constructed in such a fashion Binjhal adivasi identities encompassed both past glory and present poverty through their connection with the gaining and losing of crucial symbolic resources. In the revenue villages of eastern Borasambar, Brahmanical beliefs struggled with the egalitarian values of the Vaishnavite farmers and the animist traditions of Binjhal priestly rites to erect a caste ordered hierarchy while village politics appeared to be animated by the relative strength of competing lineages and the power of large landholders, the gountias and sahkars.

Descendants of Binjhal Headmen remember this period (1900-1920) through family stories and litigation records, as the time of great poverty for their elders. They had

suffered disproportionately during the famine years (1899-1900) because of their dependence on poorer lands. But this was also the time in which wealth and power of landed farmers and successful headman families were at its height and viewed by their descendants as the time of prosperity and consolidation. This prosperity was enabled by the price of agricultural commodities, the possibilities of expansion of cultivation in the forest and the availability of cheap labour as many social groups who had neither land ownership nor farming rights including the Binjhals had found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. As people remembered the overflowing granaries of the headman and the sahkars, it becomes clearer that poverty was now a matter of entitlement and not scarcity of food in the difficult forest areas. Transformation of forest areas into arable land marked changing social attitudes about livelihoods and lifestyles, community and identity. In the best-endowed villages, labouring or cultivation were the only legitimate means through which food or rice could be accessed to subsist and to pay taxes. From local accounts, forests were still pervasive and people were greatly dependent on these, but increasingly these were subordinate and supplementary sources of support, associated with illicit practises, hunger months, poorer social groups and even poorer hillier villages. Standards of wellbeing, status and respectability were determined by the extent of cultivation, irrigation tanks and grain stores accumulated by the wealthy farming families.

Times of the sahkars are remembered both as prosperous and oppressive. Stories about farming underscore the successes of pioneer families who came from nowhere and found their fortunes through acquiring land and farming wealth in the zamindari. Accounts of cultivation were also about the great difficulties of converting forest fields to perform intensive cultivation of valuable crops such as rice. Farming families with many fields, stores of grain, many farm servants signified the wealth of the Gountia and other landed families. Poverty at the same time was associated with fields covered with forest scrub, crops that died when rains failed and the inability of people to make ends meet without taking grain loans from the wealthier farmers, who accumulated grain and wealth in times of dearth by charging high interest on the paddy loans. For many Binjhal and other labouring families, this had been the times when children and younger men had been given by their patriarchal family heads to wealthier farmers in exchange for grain advances, where they had worked for at

least two decades as haliya or permanent farm servants. Such work roles were associated with the acute poverty of the past, though village people also say that those without these labouring options and without viable fields, would have nothing but the depleted forests to depend on. Relative prosperity of the farms and the power of the farmers shaped these comparison standards and forest work was found not only to be hard and unprofitable but also encumbered with legal obstacles.

While forest dwellers exiled from the forests learnt to labour on starvation wages, farmers were growing crops under difficult terrain. Over time, farming wealth had not been easy to sustain under rain-fed conditions. As land shares became smaller, productivity was low, crops failed through drought years and there was no great market demand for rice, farming went through a period of decline. Rural employment also declined. Hunger was a metaphor of these times (1965-1975). People particularly associated great distress with the times when they had to leave Borasambar to seek their livelihood elsewhere. Over time the wealth of cultivator diminished. Labouring people found newer routes of labouring, and performed not traditionally ordained, ritually debasing work for their daily meals but for cash wages. The sense of autonomy or freedom here is associated not just with the escape from the stranglehold of the cultivator landlords but also the perception of the diminishing authority of the cultivator and landlord classes. Poverty had undergone secular redistribution, such that there was little to differentiate between labouring people and small cultivators, living under the shadow of the taken for granted nature of hunger. As forests have become farmland, for people there was no going back to the forest way of life except in nostalgic trips and memories that were summoned for diverse purpose. Poverty has undergone a redefinition. Previously viewed as a shameful trait of subordinate groups and as moral attributes of incompetent forest dwellers, it is seen as a pervasive phenomenon that is derived from material scarcities and that requires state action and support. Revealed through hunger activism, in the local society, is not simply the opportunistic agency of sahuikars and politicians in the business of appropriating welfare funds but also the delineation of the vulnerabilities experienced by specifically situated families, rendered free of all forms of social and material support, for whom impoverishment inevitably led to death.

According to Hardiman (1994: 204), education was given as the 'panacea' by the colonial authorities for solving the problem of pauperization of the adivasis. In the Borasambar villages, education was highly valued and villagers, both men and women had often rued how in the past they had ignored its powerful benefits and effects through their own prejudices. It was the Brahmins who had benefitted the most from education at a time when the employment market was less competitive. Later, the relative gains made by a few adivasi families from labouring background that had availed of government sponsored scholarship and special schools, to obtain salaried employment had galvanized villagers' enthusiasm. Salaried families that had emerged in the 1980s were called the new sahumars of the village. While obtaining education no longer assured social mobility, it was viewed as a social necessity.

Education was conflated to define ignorance as barbarism and forest dwelling. Educated villages viewed their own practises and evaluated their way of life using influential standards from 'developed' areas and saw everywhere archaic forms of adivasi existence. This point of view had grown with the increasing activities of the postcolonial state that had brought administrators from the 'advanced' coastal areas to 'backward' Borasambar and had educated people from the village had gone to work in governmental institutions. Being educated meant discarding archaic ways of the past that symbolized not just poverty but also devalued forest dwellers' identities. In educated peoples' narratives, poverty obtained a structural explanation and was viewed as an unacceptable condition, produced by the drain of resources from the region and a phenomenon that required state action. Forest areas and forest dwelling practises were scrutinized and redefined as entrenched poverty compared to the 'developed' parts of the state and country.

Women experienced poverty in dual sense, as asset-less people in a patriarchal agrarian society where resources and authority centred on patriarchal lineages and increasingly as representatives of the past of the forests through their necessities of providing for families through un-prestigious economic work that is often shunned by men. Women's narratives about the past reveal the problems encountered by them through the social restrictions on land ownerships. The illegitimate agency of women claiming shares of their fathers' or husband's fields, had translated into great poverty for many families without adult men. Unlike other views of the past, which women did

not contradict, their particular perspective revealed the different kinds of symbolic control that operated on their lives in the past and at present. An aspect that has become particularly problematized is the role of women as economic providers in all village families irrespective of caste. At present greater role of women in economic activities connotes the poverty of the household, their low social status and the absence or incapacity of the men. The label of low prestige has extended to a variety of women's activities that were not perceived as such in the recent past when many aspects of forest dwelling practises were taken for granted. Ironically, with the end of the security of farming, women from all jati groups at present also performed less remunerative, more physically demanding and low status work often refused by men. Different forms of subordination are implicit in the understanding of gender while older forms of power have not been completely displaced.

General Findings

The concept of poverty is not a modern invention. Yet it is only in recent times that the phenomenon has been observed, defined and measured meticulously. It has become a way of classifying specifically endowed populations and there has grown moral and political urgency to act in order to remedy the situation. Poverty most importantly has been identified as an effect of redistributive injustice and unacceptable conditions of life. Diverse interpretations of wellbeing and concepts of poverty in different parts of the world have not remained unaffected by these dominant beliefs. Anthropological perspectives are of value not simply because they illuminated different perspectives about poverty but also because they enable the understanding of the structural patterns and change processes that may lead to the incidence of poverty in different times and places (Booth et al 1999: 38).

This thesis provides an understanding of poverty through the lived-remembered and expressed realities of oppressions and inequalities produced in particular places and times, through specific standpoints, positions, relationships and processes. The point has been to foreground the meaning of what causes and constitutes deprivation in the local society and to understand the symbolic power that produces and makes legitimate particular expressions while obscuring other explanations of poverty.

By tracing the historical paths unlocked by village stories, and comparing these with the micro-realities of everyday agrarian lives, it has been possible to understand why recounted experiences of cultivation, labouring and hunger, are underpinned by symbolic struggles over definitions and classifications between situated social groups over farming and forest dwelling that indicate the shifting forms and structures of local hierarchies as well as the broader processes shaping forest areas over time. As Bourdieu (2004:481) has argued, classes were produced through the incessant struggles over the classifications. But classifications also depended on power relations between classes and were produced through the struggles between them. Western Orissa poverty narratives therefore were also idioms of talking about various intertwined forms of power and exploitation in a heterogeneous farming community where material dearth becomes intelligible through experiences and relationships that indicate the state of the shifting and ambiguous relationships with the forest dwelling past.

‘The world in history is past human life as it happened.’ (Ricoeur2004: 179). But historical anthropology argues Peel (1995:583), deals with a triangle of relations: the first between ethno-history and the past or the change sequence it represents, second between this past and the social forms of the present that are its outcome and third between present social forms and the representations of the past, for whose production the present social forms provide the context. Historical incidents and perspectives from the nineteenth century are considered significant for the ‘creation of the modern Indian peasantry, its patterns of social division and its beliefs.’(Bayly 1988:136). Such perspectives are especially significant for obtaining a broad view of the marginality of forest dwelling communities, who were greatly affected through de-militarization, forest reservation, curbing of indigenous agrarian practises, expansion of permanent field cultivation and changes in land tenures. In this thesis, broad historical changes from the late nineteenth century till the early 2000, are viewed through local translations and memories that highlight fragments and aspects of these processes that indicate how material and symbolic power was produced and redistributed in the locality that emerged with the changing patterns of control over key resources such as land and positions of political authority and how the colonial administration worked through established state systems and codified

and reified existing customs (Wilmsen 1989, Dirks 1987). Historical-anthropology was significant not because it revealed the less known and unknowable aspects of 'subaltern pasts' but also because the experienced past lived on and continued to impact peoples' lives in resilient ways.

And yet, memories were never unproblematic routes to the past. Often these were ways in which identities and subjectivities that were produced within the confines of social structural hierarchies and suggested conformity to its projected and imposed values. Farmers and headmen were highly valued for their powers of patronage and their ability to create wealth in the forest. Yet it was the labour of the desperately hungry people that enabled this transformation of the landscape. Becoming like farmer landlords and appropriating their symbolic powers, have been at the heart of local poverty understanding as well as the sense of marginality. Memories were political strategies; ways to assert claims over resources and identities and produced within configurations of power and retold within broader narratives of change; which in this case was the emergence from the past of hunger, dependence and forest isolation to the improved present. Paradoxically it was through these broader changes that other parameters of entitlements, apart from the locally ordained caste and adivasi identities, that poverty came into greater focus, dislodged from its accepted place in the everyday lives of subordinate people and becoming a subject of discussion.

Were forest areas resource rich and resplendent and their inhabitants satisfied and free from want, at some point in time in the plentiful past? Did living in the forest imply plenty, in the past because people had enough for their needs or was it because they believed they had enough without other parameters to evaluate their living conditions? It would not matter, if food was short or nutrition was poor, if social attitudes towards these aspects of life were less stringent. As Donham (1999:7) argues '*...all human societies to the present have been organized by systems of material domination and ...these systems everywhere, have been to varying degrees, socially problematic. Relations of production, as Marx calls them, are like sands in an oyster. They constitute inevitable points of irritation, however such irritation is dealt with, whether it is expressed, displaced, or finally transformed into something that looks quite different.*'

From the point of view of this thesis, relative standards of poverty emerge from what people have always had or what they believed they could have or what they thought was appropriate for them. Differential understandings of poverty which include absolute poverty can emerge from different ways of knowing or being in the world, but did not imply either the non-existence of poverty or present only the evidence of stable, benign, resilient culture. Instead, standards and beliefs about living conditions including the extent to which these were viewed as unacceptable or problematic must be viewed as effects of power, which ensures that meanings are shaped by the interlocutors to fit the contours of differential entitlements, unequal access of resources and prevalent patterns of social hierarchies.

The name Borasambar comes from a mythical story. Once a group of Binjhal elders had gone for a customary trek through the forest. Here they had encountered a strange and frightening sight. An enormous snake (bura saanp) was swallowing a large deer (sambar). The deer was robust and had put up a fight but the snake was also tenacious and would not give up. In the end this effort had produced a hybrid animal, with the body of a snake and the large antlers of the deer protruding from its head. This antlered python was the Bura-Sambar, and thus the place was named. Caught between the farm and the forests, and their past and present, being and not being adivasi, village people of Borasambar can be viewed as resembling this mythical animal that had retained its prize but in the process changed into a different being.

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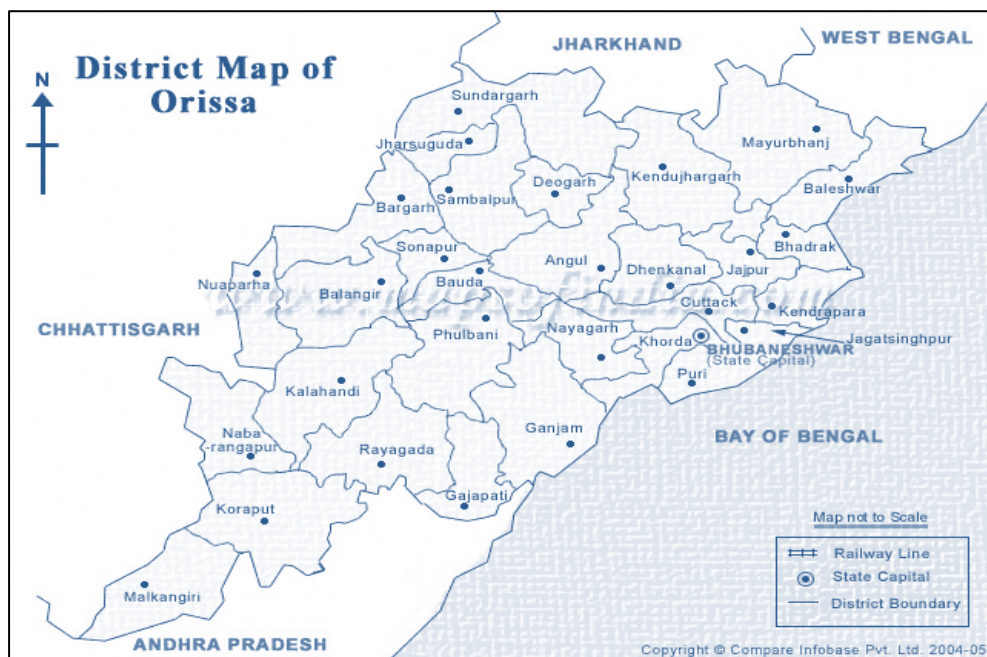
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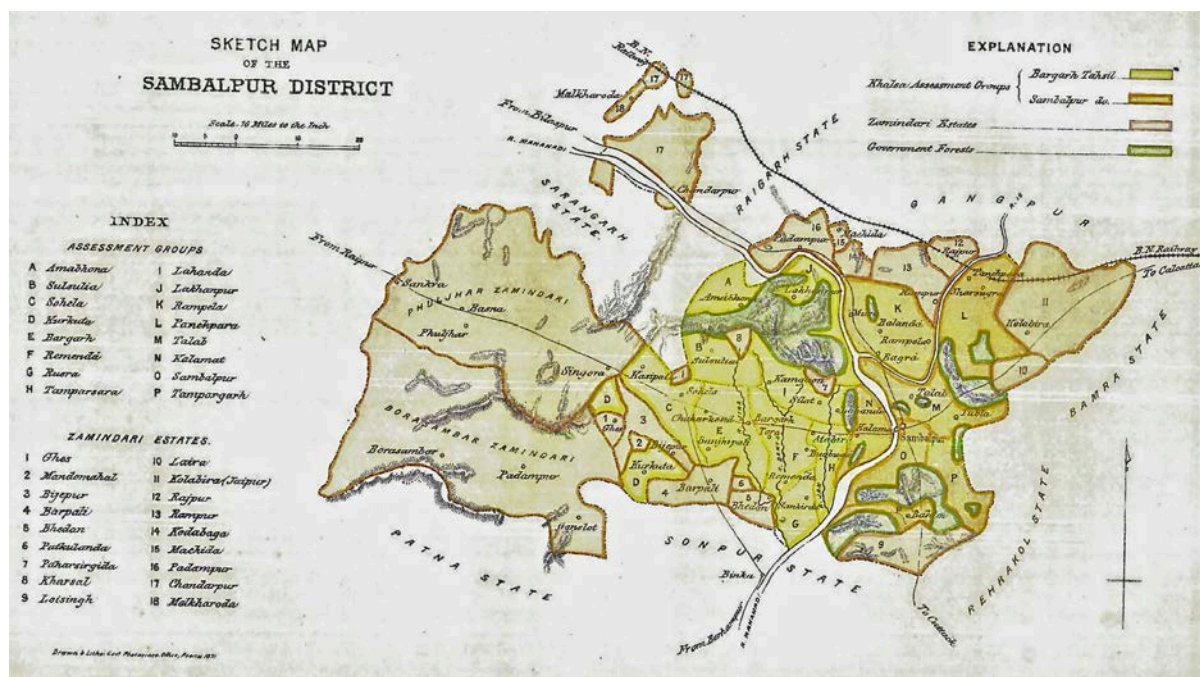
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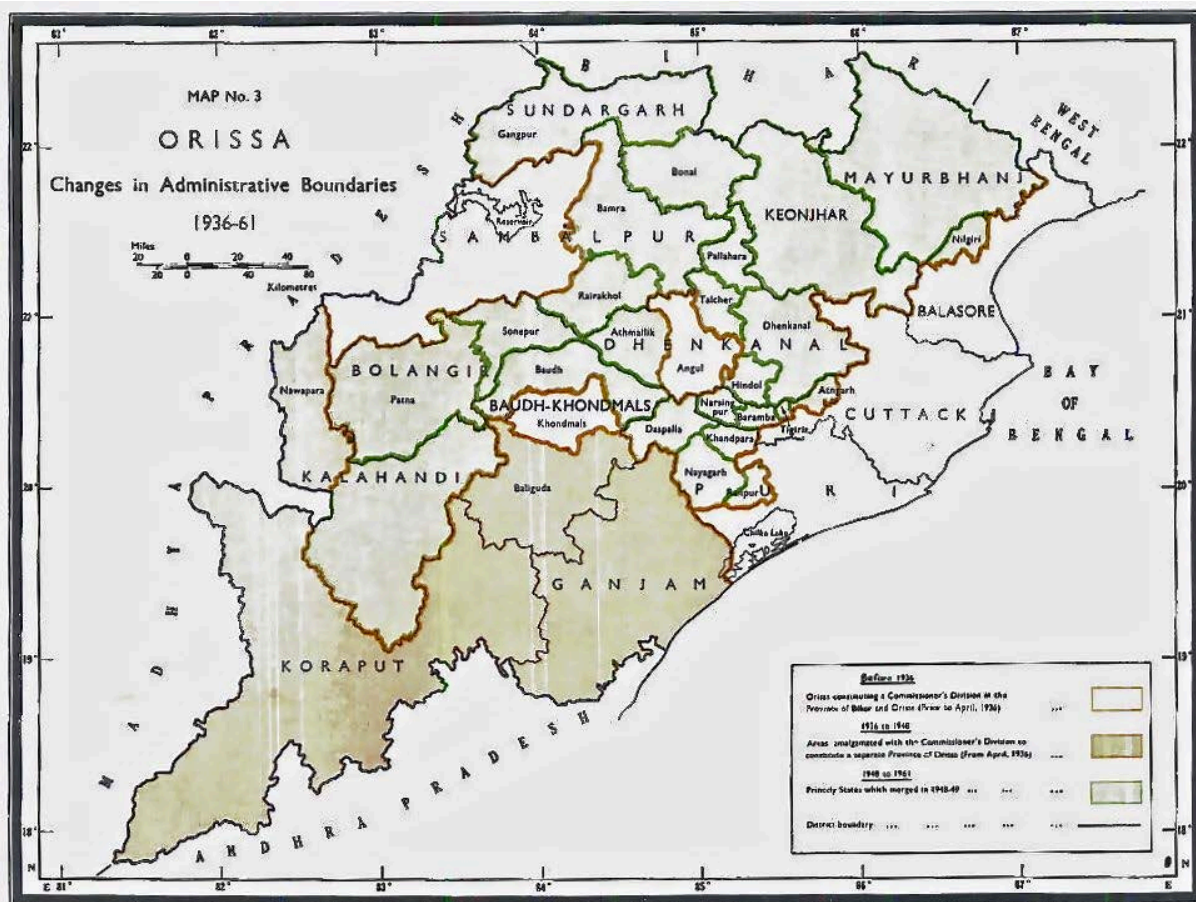
Map 1. Orissa, showing the district of Bargarh



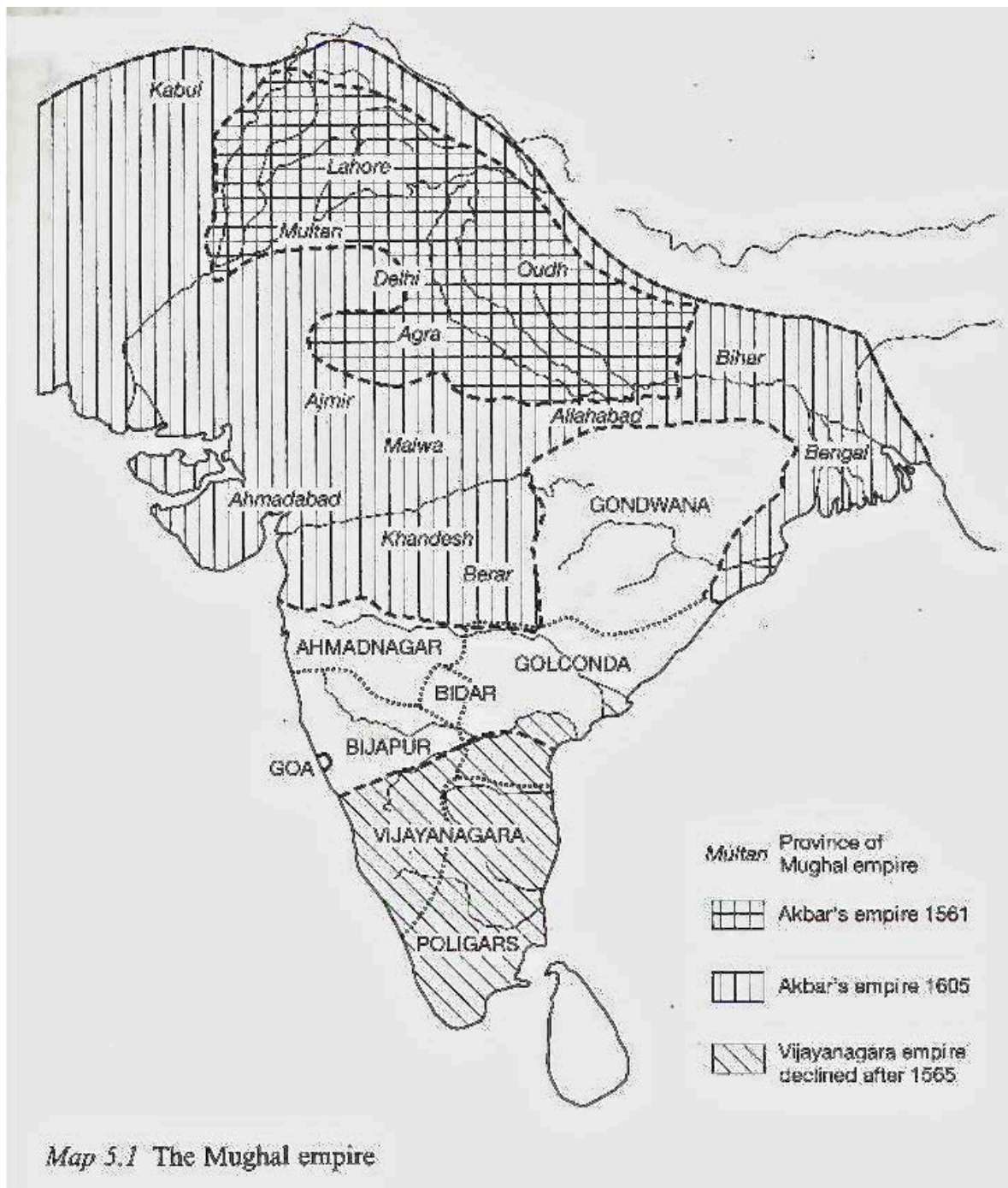
Map 2: Borasambar Zamindari in Sambalpur District in 1906. Source: Dewar (1906)



Map 3. British District of Sambalpur in Orissa, 1936



Map 4. Gondwana. Source. Kulke, H and Rothermund, D 2004.



Appendix

Table 1. Mahulkonda village families, population and reported land ownership from village survey undertaken in 2002

Jati Name	Traditional occupation	Number of families	Population	Reported land owned, in acres
Binjhals	Cultivation	50	211	90.45
Goud	Grazier, water carrier	46	206	62.9
Haldiya Teli	Cultivation, trade	37	175	115.85
Kulthas	Cultivation	30	169	215.92
Dalits	Musicians, farm workers	18	96	23
Mehers	weavers	17	94	32.5
Telpida Teli	Oil pressers	15	61	27.5
Keunt	Confectioners, farm workers	13	60	9.6
Kallars	Distillers, farmers	10	47	36
Saonra	Farm workers	10	61	28.5
Brahman	Farmers, Priests	6	37	84
Others	Washer woman, barber, blacksmith, Shiva temple priest, potter	9	37	13.5

Table 2.

Caste-wise Distribution of Land in Mahulkonda (From Village Record of Rights)

1906		1926		1978	
Jati	Landholding in acres	Jati	Landholding in acres	Jati	Landholding in acres
Binjhal	115.56	Zamindar	113.38	Teli	59.32
Kallar	65.77	Teli	101.1	Kultha	35.11
Haldiya Teli	39.17	Kallar	66.37	Kultha	32.74
Haldiya Teli	38.53	Saonra	60.67	Binjhal	31.51

Binjhal	37.90	Binjhal	40.35	Brahman/Cooli	31.75
Kultha	34.75	Kultha	39.19	Brahman	27.77
Brahman	31.01	Teli	38.25	Binjhal	26.39
Haldiya Teli	29.16	Brahman	31.37	Brahman	23.52
Kultha	28.69	Kallar	29.53	Brahman	29.64
Kallar	28.44	Kultha	23.43	Kultha	21.47

Table 3

Land Distribution in Mahulkonda by Jati In acres							
	Teli	Binjhal	Goud	Kultha	Kallar	Brahman	Others
1906	197.28	185	64.9	117.49	79.9	45.02	30.02
1926	186.8	64.47	74.97	126.06	95.9	59.29	75.66
1978	135.23	105.69	54.53	199.8	47.99	113.48	52.84
2002	109.7	96.35	62.9	167	36	84	91.1

Source: data for 1906-1978 is calculated from village record of rights, 2002 data is from village census.

Table 4

Distribution of Bahal or valley bottom rice land in Mahulkonda 1902-06, in acres

Teli	Binjhal	Goud	Kultha	Kallar	Brahman
40.42	39.12	16.2	4.8	3.57	17.58

Source: calculated from village record of rights

Table 5

Distribution of M.I dam Irrigation access land in acres by jati in Mahulkonda, 2002-03

Goud	Binjhal	Teli-H	Kultha	Kallar	Brahman	Cooli	Harijan	Keunt	Teli-T	others
38.4	19.22	40.2	98.9	14.5	31	7	5.4	9	2	1.8

Source: from village census undertaken in 2002-03

Table 6

Types of agricultural land in Mahulkonda, in acres, 1906

Aant or unembanked Upland	Mal - high terraced Rice Land	Berna- Intermediate Rice Land	Bahal- Valley Bottom Rice Land	Bari- Garden Land
424.57	94.72	110.75	141.87	12.66

Crops grown in Mahulkonda Village

Kudo, Millet: *Paspalum Scrobiculatum*

Biri, Black gram: *Phaseolus mungo*

Mung, Green gram: *Vigna radiata*

Rahadi, Pigeon pea: *Cajanus cajan*

Mungfali, Groundnut: *Arachis hypogea*

Rashi, Sesame: *Sesamum indicum*

Kopa, cotton: *Gossypium* spp.

Konhoria, Brown hemp: *Hibiscus cannabinus*

Horse gram, kulatha: *Dolichos biflorus*

Castor, Jada: *Ricinus communis*

Gurji, millet: *Panicum miliare*

Char Berries: *Buchanania lanzan*

Forest and Garden food

Forest food	Season in which it is available
Kordi (bamboo shoots)	Sraban-Bhudo (July-August)
Different kinds of Mushrooms (choti)	Sraban- Bhudo
Buro (Jujube)	Magh-Fogun (february – march)
Kendu (fruit of the Indian Ebony)	Chait-baisakh (march-april)
Green Mangoes	Baisakh-jeth (april-May)
Tentel (tamarind), Kusum	Baisakh-jeth
Char	Chait-Baisakh-jeth (march-april-may)
Mahul	Baisakh-Jeth (April-May)
Tal (PalmyraPalm fruit)	Baisakh-jeth
Tol (Mahul seed)	Jeth-Ashad (May-June-July)
Jamun or kola jam	Jeth-Ashad
Badhal (custard apple), Maya (guavas)	Dashera-mokshir
Kuler saag, munga saag, fan saag, bohul phul, siler saag, Leem phul (edible leaves, flowers and greens)	Chait – bhudo

Glossary

Aant-tikra: high, uneven, un-embanked upland field	Barkas: Strong and hard working man or woman	Daari, Chakhi, Bitangi: immoral women
Anatan: scarcity of food	Banki: Common stem boring pest infesting rice	Debta: Gods, Spirits
Bahal: valley bottom rice field	Baoli-chuan: perennial well	Dhan: Husked Rice
Barah: Boar	Bahal-chuan: temporary well on bahal land	Dhenki: wooden Rice husker in which the foot is used for pounding
Behasen: bride or married woman	Bari-chuan: well on homestead garden	Dhenki - shaal: place where the rice husker is kept
Ber, buro: Jujube	Chandi: outspoken women	Dora: men who were cowardly
Bhona: thorny bush and scrub	Char: Chironji seeds	Duli: leveled field suitable for growing rice
Bhutyar: daily wage agricultural worker	Chator: Tree-less, barren	Gaan: village
Bondhoi: Dam	Cher: Bird	Gaan-Khoul: village public places, village-street
Bui: Girl, Brahman girl	Cheri-muli: root and bark medicine	Ganit: Binjhal priests who conduct marriages for their community
Buna dhan: Broadcast Rice	Chotti: Mushroom	Ghona: Bullock drawn wooden oil press
Byar-Boysa: Vegetable garden behind the house	Chowkidar: village watchman	

Gochar: Common grazing land	Kota: three-sided tank	Kuchnia: women market-trader
Gountia: village headman	Kendu: fruit of the Indian ebony	Lag: Grain-debt
Gudi: Place of worship, sacred place	Kendu Pattar: Leaf of the Indian Ebony used for making local cigarettes	Leccha: Gum collected from trees
Gunia: Shaman	Kendu Phadi: forest department storage huts for kendu Leaves	Lota: weeds
Haanri - shal : Hearth or cooking fire	Khaja: Sweets	Lota bacha: Weeding
Halia: farm servants hired on a yearly basis	Khed: agricultural season	Ludar: a measure approximately 8 sacks of husked rice (75 kg)
Jama, Ghar: Patri-lineage	Khet: field	Mahul: flower of the Bassia Latifolia tree
Jhankar: Binjhal priest associated with the village	Khola: barn	Mita-Maarsaad (Mahaprasad): Ritual friend
Jhar: Forest	Khondi: Local measure for grain, 1 Khondi is approximately 20 kilograms	Modudi: When crops die due to drought or lack of rain
Jokha: insane	Khora Mash: Summer month	Nariha: water carrier of the Goud jati
Jor: Stream or river	Kurma: Small straw hut used for shelter in the unfenced field by the person keeping a watch over crops	Narihen: Women usually of the Goud jati who worked as water carriers, cooks and sometimes domestic servants
Joutuk: dowry		
Juen: son in law, also fire		
Juhar: Greeting		
Juna: Old	Kusher: Sugarcane	

Nisaat: Men who were
useless and dishonest

Noni: Girl

Pala: Rice Seedling

Pala rua: transplanting
Rice seedling

Patra: Thinned out or
degraded Forest

Pati-Chonkha: timber
used for constructing the
ceiling of tile houses

Pitha: Sweet or salty
steamed, roasted or fried
Rice cakes

Pirha: verandah outside
the house where people
sit and chat

Pura: Rice straw basket
used for storing grains

Purug: Local measure for
grain

Rash, Rashi: Sesame
seeds

Rua Dhan: transplanted
rice

Shikar: Hunting, Also any
meat that is eaten even if
its bought

Sutar/Oin: Women or
Men who were good and
well tempered

Tambi: Local measure
and measuring vessels
for grain, 1 Tambi is
approximately 900 grams

Tol gorra or Tol dal:
Mahua seeds from which
oil is pressed

Tongia: Axe

Tonhai: Witch, can be a
man or a woman

Tookel: Girl

Tikra: hilly land