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# Environment, Ethnicity and History in Chotanagpur, India, 1850–1970

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## SUMMARY

The paper has attempted to show the ways in which the recurring image of an older landscape has served as a powerful metaphor in Chotanagpur's resurgence. It directly fuelled protest movements in the late nineteenth century and was part of a new emotive language as a modern political idiom came to be developed by the Jharkhand parties in the twentieth century. The cultural revival signalled by the Janata Mukti Morcha in the 1970s found expression in the festival of the sacred grove which was to become one of the most important markers of Chotanagpuri identity and the site where larger and more powerful hegemonies were constituted, contested and transformed. The paper is also an illustration of the more general problem of historical research and demonstrates the ways in which a post-modern analysis of cultural categories such as ethnicity can be related to the old realities of power politics.

Recent studies following the pioneering work of writers such as Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and Benedict Anderson in Europe and Leroy Vail in Africa have effectively argued that ethnicity and ethnic ideologies are historically contingent creations.<sup>1</sup> This line of research challenges the ahistorical and primordial assumptions underlying nationalist and ethnic ideologies. In the words of Leroy Vail 'If ethnic consciousness was a product of historical experience, then its creation and elaboration would be a proper subject of enquiry for historians.'<sup>2</sup> However, while there has been a great deal written on ethnicity and ethnic identities as constructed through class, race and gender ideologies,<sup>3</sup> the ways in which ethnic identities have been constructed around images of the land and the changing meanings of the landscape is neglected.<sup>4</sup> In particular, there is very limited work on the ways in which images of the landscape have fuelled cultural and political resistance against a dominant and aggrandising state.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, most studies of the landscape have concentrated on the arable parts of the landscape while the non-arable forest, pastoral, mountain, marsh and other areas

is ignored. The growing domain of environmental history has recently attempted to document the forest and non-forest parts of the non arable environment and its relationship with indigenous peoples in the colonial context.<sup>6</sup> However there is a need to understand the links between images of the landscape, the construction of identities and cultural resistance, especially in South Asia. In particular, scholars will need to discuss the complexities of the relationship between the spiritual memory of remembered landscapes and modern politics. This study explores the important contemporary issues of environmental degradation, ethnic and regional dissidence through an analysis of the ways in which identities have been constructed around images of the land and forest in Chotanagpur. The narrative extends over the colonial and post-colonial period thus avoiding the confusing division of labour between historians and political scientists, and is conducted in the light of recent theoretical advances made in the historiography of India.

In the southern part of Bihar state, the region of Chotanagpur is now the site of a widespread movement for statehood for its 30 million inhabitants, many of whom belong to indigenous (*adivasi*) groups. The demand for Jharkhand also includes other districts in the neighbouring states of Orissa, Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, a total of 23 districts are involved. The movement centres mainly on an explicit assertion of the 'rights' of the indigenous people of the region to take charge of their own territory and resources and to revive a diverse and rich culture which has been long suppressed by a state controlled by the dominant non-*adivasi* Hindu elite.<sup>7</sup> The Jharkhand movement regards itself as being linked to earlier nineteenth century tribal protest movements against the dispossession of ancestral lands and forests and other interventions into a traditional way of life by the colonial state. Their historical consciousness enables the Chotanagpuris to construct their history as one that evokes the memory of past exploitation which has helped to attract a wider constituency to the political platform of the Jharkhand parties and has enabled the construction of a pan-tribal identity. The discourse of marginality forcefully articulates the history of the region as one in which the indigenous inhabitants of Chotanagpur were alienated from their lands and forests, gradually peripheralised in regional politics and subjected to the whims of the colonial state. In this context, the institutions of the courts and the police are seen as bolstering the interventions of a predominantly Hindu elite in local society.<sup>8</sup> Much of this discourse has hinged on claims that local communities are the best stewards of the landscape and by reference to a global environmentalism. Following independence, the Jharkhand parties received a new impetus in the context of renewed exploitation. The situation of the *adivasis* steadily worsened as the nationalist state, on the grounds of a new state ideology of 'tribal assimilation' increased its incursions into Chotanagpuri society, with harsh consequences for its inhabitants.

Given a sustained attack on the material position and identity of the indigenous people in Chotanagpur, their minority discourse in the present period has emerged as the outcome of damage systematically inflicted on their cultures

under both colonial and post-colonial rule. When I use the term culture, I do not use it in a homogenous or static form. Rather, I would like to invoke James Clifford when he chooses to see culture as constructed and disputed and constantly reshaped through displacement and interaction. There is therefore a need to locate Chotanagpuri culture in a history of cultural and inter-regional relationships.

The question that should be asked here is whether Chotanagpuri cultural identity was shaped in the colonial theatre? This would lead us to an argument made popular by the Comaroffs in the context of southern Africa based on the notion that Tswana ethnicity was a profoundly historical creation and that the Tswana sense of difference from the 'other' was to emerge as a central trope in Tswana historical consciousness only through their interaction with white culture.<sup>9</sup> This assertion is problematic, for while it can be argued that the interaction with colonial culture was a dynamic one and resulted in new cultural forms, this does not mean there was no strong sense of identity in Chotanagpur previously. The identity of different Chotanagpuri communities was one that had developed over the centuries through their migration to the hills away from the plains, through their encounters with different groups in their journey into the hills and finally through the multiplicity of their engagements with the forests and the land in the place of their final settlement.<sup>10</sup> In the later period, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the encounter of various Chotanagpur communities with Hindu moneylenders had resulted in the rejection of notions of exchange and property of the plains peoples. To construct the Chotanagpuris as the Comaroffs have done for the Tswana is to construct them as unchanging and timeless before the encounter with colonial rule. The people in Chotanagpur had lived in villages, travelled and encountered other cultures in the past and had a clear sense of historical consciousness.<sup>11</sup> As Clifford writes 'the chronotope of culture then ... comes to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence.... culture seen as a rooted body that grows, lives and dies is questioned, constructed and disputed. Historicities, sites of displacement, interference and interaction come sharply into view.'<sup>12</sup> Community has to be seen as a constructed entity and a sense of place as one that is 'contingent and negotiated'.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century it can be argued that, as a result of ever increasing interventions by a modernising colonial state, *adivasi* culture was gradually reduced to the status of a 'minority culture' by the dominant culture resulting in a growing *adivasi* consciousness and a sense of an authentic *adivasi* identity. The destruction involved in the process of interaction with a dominant culture was manifold, resulting, in Chotanagpur, in dramatic changes in the relationship between local people and their environment and in the dismantling of a previously functional economic system. In concert with this material destruction, the cultural formations, language and the diverse modes of identity of the people were irreversibly affected and displaced by a single mode of historical development within which tribal cultures were perceived as 'underdeveloped', 'imperfect', 'childlike' or even 'criminal'.<sup>13</sup> There is little doubt that

this resulted in a growing sense of *adivasi* identity which was to fuel a long cycle of protest and resistance

The construction of tribals as 'simple and childlike' and in need of progress runs right through much of colonial writing in the period, albeit with some important exceptions.<sup>14</sup> Tribal practices were defined in colonial and later national ethnographies as static, unchanging and primitive. Ecologically, the developmental ideology of the colonial state in the nineteenth century brought havoc in its wake to hitherto remote regions such as Chotanagpur, where rapid deforestation (primarily to meet the timber needs of the new railways) and open cast mines transformed the relationship of the local people with their environment. Migration into the region, which had a long history, increased dramatically in the nineteenth century and resulted in heavy pressure on the land, dispossession of indigenous people's lands and emigration outside the region by *adivasi* communities who found themselves fast becoming minorities in their own districts. A large percentage of the population of Ranchi district were registered as having emigrated to the Assam tea gardens between 1864 and 1880 and many thousands more had left unbeknown to the officials. It was a sad flight of a proud people subordinated to the ranks of 'coolie' labour in mines and plantations. One needs to examine the historical background to this development.

#### THE LANDSCAPE OF SERVITUDE

Over the nineteenth century, colonial ecological science had clearly demonstrated the adaptability and the productivity of local agricultural practices. However, generations of agricultural experts still believed that a profitable agricultural system could not be created in this area without mechanisation and its concomitant resettlement. As a result, these experts were contemptuous of local agricultural practices. As the Ranchi settlement report recorded for the area 'the system of cultivation is primitive and the soil is poor. Irrigation is neglected and manuring practised on the uplands. They (the people) are thriftless and indolent and only the pinch of poverty drives them to undertake any sustained employment'<sup>15</sup>We can see here the nature of the discourse that helped to construct Chotanagpur as an object of knowledge and as a subject of intervention.

Colonial constructions of the landscape had a similar tone. The forests were in the early part of the nineteenth century primarily regarded as a resource. The perceived policy of the colonial rulers was to extend cultivation at the expense of forest tracts and to exterminate all wild and dangerous game. The rewards offered by the state to destroy tigers effectively decimated the population of these magnificent beasts. In the Santhal Parganas, E.G. Man reported in the 1860s that where elephants and rhinos were abundant as late as the 1830s and 1840s 'now the latter are extinct and of the former but three are left'<sup>16</sup> In Ranchi, the district

gazetteer recorded the unchecked destruction of forests in the district in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> A major cause of the destruction of the jungles in most districts was the sale or the lease of the forest to contractors for supply of railway sleepers. Entire forests were destroyed to supply the timber necessary for railways. The opening of the railway to Ranchi and Lohardagga in the nineteenth century and the improvement of communications by road led to the sale of jungles previously untouched. Coupled with this, landlord encroachments on village jungles and the sale of timber to outsiders further exacerbated the destruction of the jungle.

During these developments the colonial administration continued to argue that traditional forest use seriously exacerbated the destruction of the forest. It was said that peasants were continuing age old practices which had scarcely harmed the forest when it was in abundance, but now only further threatened its destruction. *Jhuming* (shifting cultivation) was also said to threaten jungles in remoter parts of the district. Interestingly the writers of the settlement report in 1906 were forced to concede that the destruction wrought by such methods accounted for only a small percentage of the deforestation in Dalbhum.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of this the government and the forest department still embarked on a wholesale programme of forest reservation and exclusion of indigenous communities from the forest. This state programme had a far-reaching impact on the lives of the local people. In many places the landlord and the state had long battled with each other to secure large areas of jungle land, extinguishing the traditional common rights of the people. Under the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, all such rights had been transferred to the landlord, to enable such lands to be taxed. The landlords then proceeded wherever they could to extinguish peasant rights to common property resources in several parts of the region. As the forests on which they depended on for their food resources dwindled, the region began to suffer from famines and the late nineteenth century saw a 'rash of famines'.

#### *Agricultural marginality*

During this period, landlordism came to dominate rural social relations. While the northern districts had begun to be heavily overrun by Hindu immigrants before the advent of the British the pace of change increased under colonial rule and even the southern districts began to feel threatened. The Mundas in Ranchi for example had managed to hold on to their traditional *Khuntkhatti* tenures in the face of outsider landlord encroachment. By the time of the Census operations in 1881, the original indigenous population in the districts of Palamau and Hazaribagh was only 36% and 34% while in the remoter districts of Ranchi and Hazaribagh it was 74% and 75%. In the northern districts of Palamau and Hazaribagh and in the Santhal Parganas increasing subinfeudation and the growing spread of debt bondage were the main grievances of the peasantry. In

the Santhal Parganas, the main causes of distress were the grasping and rapacious mahajans, the misery of hereditary bondage, and the unparalleled corruption of the police and the impossibility of redress in the courts. In certain districts, as in Birbhum, the invasion of the pargana by a powerful English company bent on destroying the rights of the Ghatwals or Bhumij *khuntkhattidars* gave rise to much disturbance. These settler rights all across Chotanagpur were challenged by colonial courts and superior land interests. One settlement report recorded 'It is common experience in Chotanagpur that the aboriginals are ruined by their incapacity to state their claims intelligently'. Clearly the discursive and political framework in which they had to operate disadvantaged the indigenous people. The incidence of debt bondage began rapidly to spread and peasants were often forced to borrow money from the landlord or moneylender to meet local needs. The system that developed was known as *kamiaouti* and led to the absolute degradation of the *kamias*. By gradually advancing small sums of money to them in lieu of land many Hindu landlords converted their tenants into slaves and reduced their holdings to tiny homestead lands. Some of the poorest peasantry migrated away from their homeland to work elsewhere. The new coal mines in Ranchi and Dhanbad and the tea gardens of Assam and Bhutan found a cheap and abundant labour force among a dispossessed and impoverished rural population. One Santhali song records this process thus

Sahrul I could not dance  
 My *jhuri* has gone as a coolie  
 Only with him can I dance  
 My *jhuri* has gone as a coolie<sup>19</sup>

The grave effects of unrestrained interventions into the lives of the indigenous peoples of Chotanagpur were apparent by the middle of the nineteenth century, even to the conservative colonial state. Following the experiments of Augustus Cleveland in the Santhal Parganas in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and his attempts to preserve tribal institutions and concepts of 'justice', the colonial state was forced to recognise certain special areas and the entire province of Chotanagpur was put under the charge of an officer, designated agent to the governor-general in 1831.<sup>20</sup> Under the Government of India Act of 1870, the British Parliament conferred on the Governor-General-in-council the power to approve and sanction as laws, regulations made by the local government for the administration of certain special areas. This rather belated recognition was followed by the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874. This act empowered the local government to declare (for each of the tracts specified in the Act) which enactments were in force and to what modifications or restrictions they were subject. However, apart from giving these areas special status, these changes came too late to have any significant effect on the lives of the indigenous peoples of Chotanagpur.

In the twentieth century, the colonial state continued to experiment with cosmetic reforms. The Chotanagpur Land Alienation Act was strengthened in 1908 to prevent further alienation of tribal lands. Anthropologists such as Grigson, Grierson and Verrier Elwin became critics of colonial state policy towards tribes and vehement advocates of 'isolationist' policies intended to preserve the way of life of the indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup> These men passionately believed that the tribals of central and north-eastern India had to be protected against modernisation. It has been argued that the British government found in this new ideology a cloak for its reluctance to spend heavily in tribal areas which were not considered to be major contributors to the imperial treasury. The ideology was also seen as useful in preventing the spread of nationalist ideas in these regions. Whatever the motives, this new thinking came too late to rectify the ills resulting from forced modernisation in Chotanagpur.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE REMEMBERED LANDSCAPE

*Oh for the days when men knew no cares  
and drank their fill of home brewed ale  
Woe to the age when men on earth below  
Do daily die of famine*

(Munda song recorded by S.C. Roy in the 1900s)

Identities were transformed in the context of this rapid ecological and cultural change. As Steve Daniels notes (and this is certainly true both of ethnic and national identities), 'Identities are often defined by legends and landscapes, by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery. The symbolic activation of time and space often drawing on religious sentiment gives shape to the imagined community of the nation.'<sup>23</sup> It must be noted here that the term landscape is a complex concept. As Cosgrove argues the term can be seen as a 'socio-historical construct', a way of seeing projected onto the land which has its own techniques and which articulates a particular way of experiencing a relationship with nature. It can be argued in a similar fashion, that the landscape of Chotanagpur has been reclaimed and reconstituted as a complex symbolic terrain for definitions of Chotanagpuri identity.<sup>24</sup> It is useful here to note, as Sahlins does in the context of Hawaii, that 'the landscape and its legends inscribe a criticism of the existing regime. In the current jargon, the landscape is text. Places and names evoke an alternative society older, truer and more directly related to the people.' In this way were the landscapes of Chotanagpur organised by stories and legends of conquest and defeat and through memories of better times.



*The symbolism of the landscape and past readings of it*

In the context of Amazonia, Peter Gow shows how the Bayo Urubanka river was lived as a human landscape by local native peoples through a multiplicity of engagements with the forest and the river, with each other in acts of generosity, in narration and in encounter with the dead and with spirits.<sup>25</sup> In a similar fashion were the landscapes of Chotanagpur lived as a human landscape in the past. The original forests were spread out over thousands of square miles, especially in the districts of Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Palamau and Ranchi, all of which had large forest areas. Indigenous rulers had tended to preserve the forest for military reasons and as Walter Hamilton noted in 1820, in several parts of Chotanagpur the woods had been forested with great care by the rajas as a protection against invasion from without. The trees were mainly either moist deciduous or dry deciduous and the whole division had a very rich growth of *sal* (*Shorea robusta*).

Ranchi district in the centre of the Gangetic tract was one area where the *sal* tree was most dominant. The best *sal* forests were found here in the valleys where in good soil straight trees up to 120 feet in height and with a girth of up to 15 feet were found. In the valleys, especially in sheltered situations, the principal companions of the *sal* were the *asan*, (*Terminalia tomentosa*), *gambhar*, *kend* and *simal*. The *mahua* tree (*Bassia latifolia*) was common throughout Chotanagpur and was very important to the local economy. In the villages better fruit bearing trees grew like the *jamun* (*Eugenia jambolina*) *karanj* (*Ponamia glabra*) *tetar* (*Tamarindus indica*), *bael* (*Aegle marmegos*), jackfruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) and *ber* (*Ficus benglensis*). There were many other forest shrubs and trees which yielded fruit and which afforded valuable food supplements in years of scarcity. Slacke, in his report on the settlement operations in Chotanagpur estate in 1882, enumerated 21 species of seeds and the fruits of 45 uncultivated trees which were used as food in addition to 34 trees the leaves of which were used as vegetables, and 18 species of edible roots. Slacke also gives the names of 97 forest products used as medicines, 28 used as oil and gums, 17 used as dyes and 33 creepers or barks of trees used as rope fibres. The length of these lists gives us some indication of the economic value of the jungles to the indigenous inhabitants. Valentine Ball noted in the 1860s that several of the communities were heavily dependent on jungle products. For example the *keriahs* of the Jolhari hills, who were not settled agriculturists, relied on the jungle for a supply of fruits, leaves and roots. This they supplemented with rice procured from the lowland agricultural communities by trading jungle products such as honey, *lac*, *sal* seeds and leaves and *tusser* cocoons.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the communities, even the settled agricultural ones and particularly the women of these communities had a highly sophisticated technical knowledge of their jungle habitat. The Ho's of Singhbhum, for example, had names for all the common plants and those of economic importance to them and, like the forest Mundas, were well versed in the edible properties of plants. The Birhor, in the

extreme east of Singhbhum, were a wandering community who lived by snaring monkeys and by collecting the fibre of the *Bauhinia vahlii* creeper.<sup>27</sup> The forest environment, and a knowledge of it, were thus of critical importance to the local people, particularly in dietary terms. This importance in terms of food was paralleled by an equal significance in systems of belief; and the two were not truly separable. Chotanagpur folk taxonomy was completely embedded in and mediated by the local cultural order.

Munda understandings of the landscape and its productivity seemed to encompass conceptual links between women and forests. Every Munda village, for example, had its own particular spirits whose duty it was to look after the crops. These spirits were known as *bongas*, which was a generic name referring to spirits and the power or force of mountains, hills, forests, trees, rivers, houses and village. One such spirit, known as Desawali, played a large part in Munda festivals which were connected with the cultivation of the land. The home of this presiding deity was the *sarna* or sacred grove, a little path of jungle, that when all else was cleared for cultivation, was left as a refuge for the gods where they might live apart. At all seasons of the year offerings were made in the *sarna*, for on the favour of the Desawali depended the success and failure of the crops. The other communities such as the Oraons also had a festival connected with the sacred grove which was observed with much ceremony in March and April. It occurred when the *sal* tree was in flower and its graceful plume-like blossoms decked the earth. All the villagers assembled in the *sarna* where the *sarna burhi* or the woman of the grove was said to reside. The *sahrul* festival was an act of rejoicing in the jungle which had come into flower. It was a fecundity ceremony, a marriage of the earth with the sun. On the assumption that the soil is ready to be quickened, the fertility of the jungle is used to stimulate the fertility of the fields. The fecundity of the forest thus made it in many ways a female space.<sup>28</sup> This was expressed, for example, in certain rituals among Oraons involving a *sal* sapling in which a slit had been made to resemble a female organ, which was used to augment the procreative energy of men. As Roy noted a week before the Phagun festival in March and again before the *Sahrul* festival in April or May the boys of the dormitory were led forth by the Dhumkuria Mahato to a suitable secluded place some way off from the village where they would smear their bodies with red earth. The boys then proceeded to spit into the slit in the sapling and insert their organ into the slit. All the time the Mahato stood behind the *sal* sapling with the new *sal* wood stick in his hand and as each boy was about to step back after performing the magic operation the mahato struck the boy on his thigh, a little below the groin.<sup>29</sup> Here we find individual trees representing a woman. The Munda and Santhal aesthetic traditions seemed to represent this connection. Women's domestic wall designs in large parts of Chotanagpur incorporate forest and foliage motifs into their active aesthetic traditions to induce fertility for themselves and in after-life.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that this symbolic construction of the special relationship of Chotanagpuri women with the natural

environment had a basis in the prevailing gender division of labour which made these women primarily responsible for fetching fuelwood, fodder and water.

The propitiating of the female spirits of the grove was, however, mainly done by men with women being excluded. The sacrifice began by sacrificing fowls before a rough image of mud or stone. At night the villagers returned home with *sal* blossoms and marched to the beating of the drums and the blowing of the horns, with much dancing along the way. The following morning the women, gaily decked with *sal* blossoms, carried baskets filled with the same blossoms which they placed over the door of every house for luck. The festivals of the sacred grove were very important for the settled agricultural communities of Chotanagpur and emphasised the importance of the forest and its flowering seasons in the ritual life of the communities. The forest was central to human life, and forest and village together made up a spiritual and moral entity. It was to be protected and preserved and the people must respect it. Clearly a symbiotic relationship prevailed between the people and the landscape in Chotanagpur.<sup>31</sup> This interpretation is clearly different from the perception of the Mende of Sierra Leone in an anthropological study conducted in 1980, in which the forest is regarded as opposing mankind and as an obstacle to human progress; the Mende believing that the bush contained innumerable dangers including evil spirits and that it constantly threatens farms.<sup>32</sup> The Chotanagpuris on the other hand tended to experience the forest and village as ontologically part of each other, the one being the life force for the other's continuing existence. An interesting study among the Nayaka of south India by Nurit Bird David argues for a similar cosmic economy of sharing.<sup>33</sup> The Nayakas converse, dance, sing and even share cigarettes with the spirits of the forest which they invoke with shamanistic experience.

One should point out here that this is not a story of an unchanging pristine landscape, the narrative is not a version of Chotanagpur's idyllic environmental past. Clearly the people's engagement with the forests in multiple ways saw the creation of a human landscape, one that was ever changing with past forests giving way to settlements, shifting agricultural practices and altering boundaries between villages and forests. Nature was not *out there*, it was a lived relationship for the people of Chotanagpur. Only detailed environmental histories of villages will allow us to piece together these rich and complex stories.<sup>34</sup> However, what can be forcefully argued here is that Chotanagpuri understandings of the landscape, their stories of nature, and their lived history were to differ radically from the perceptions of nature and the land of colonial scientists and policy makers and later of a modernising nationalist elite.<sup>35</sup> The destruction of forests that was to occur as a result of colonial intervention in the nineteenth century and later was to change this relationship between the people and their environment drastically and forever. However, the memory of the landscape was to live on and it became a repository of Chotanagpur's nostalgic past to be revived in complex oppositional contexts. Simon Schama has noted that 'Landscapes are culture

before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected on to wood, water and rock.... once a certain idea of the landscape, a myth, a vision establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming in fact part of the scenery.<sup>36</sup>

The despoliation of the forested landscape and the transformation of the people's relationship with their environment in Chotanagpur in the nineteenth century, was a powerful memory which was revived in periods of cultural resistance. In the latter half of the twentieth century this resulted in specific cultural images of the landscape being evoked through the ritual festivals of the scared grove and emerging as a factor in protest. Images of the landscape have long played a role in cultural resistance in other regions. For example, as Daniels notes, the 'ethnic nationalism fuelling the dissolution of the Soviet Union was codified by pictorial images of independent homelands'.<sup>37</sup> It can be argued, that resistance may have been fanned by memory of better times in a less despoiled setting. These memories were present in the 'landscape of their current servitude'.<sup>38</sup> In the context of Chotanagpur, the 'remembered landscape' was to fuel a long struggle of protest.

#### THE POLITICS OF MARGINALITY

All through the nineteenth century the indigenous communities had sought to protest against the growing incursions into their lives. Beginning with the unrest in Tamar in 1816 and the Munda rebellion in 1832 the last decades of the nineteenth century saw unrest in the almost every district of Chotanagpur. The Birsa Munda uprising in the 1890s which began as a protest against colonial forest laws was the culmination of this period of rebellion. British forest reservation laws had long proved irksome to the Mundas and in the context of the degradation of their forest environment, the exploitation by Hindu money lenders and an modernising colonial state, they rose in protest.

By the twentieth century there was thus an established tradition of resistance in the region. In 1915 British reports began to mention the Tana Bhagat disturbances among the Oraons in Ranchi district. Their movement, which had strong religious overtones, aimed to redress local grievances against zamindars and traders. The Oraons were apparently enjoined by divine command to 'give up superstitious practices and animal sacrifices', to 'stop eating meat and drinking liquor', to 'cease ploughing their fields', and to withdraw their field labour from non-*adivasi* landowners.<sup>39</sup> One of the movement's leaders, Sibū Oraon, had been reported as distributing leaflets to the effect that *zamindari* raj had come to an end, that it was no longer necessary to pay rent or *chaukidari* tax, that the Marwaris were selling cloth very dear and should be turned out and their cloths burnt and that the bones of Muhammadans should be broken because they

killed cows.<sup>40</sup> The movement had a large following and was said to resemble Birsa Munda's uprising of 1895. By the 1920s, the Tana Bhagat movement had acquired 'disturbing' links with the Congress movement in the rest of Bihar. Gandhi's non-cooperation struggle resulted in renewed agitation in Chotanagpur and the protesters intensified their demands for low rents, restoration of rights to the jungle and abolition of forced labour.<sup>41</sup> The restriction of access to forests and fresh water fisheries resulted in a wave of protest among Oraons, Mundas and Santhals in the 1920s and 30s in Midnapur, Bankura and Singhbhum and the rest of Chotanagpur. Many of these were fuelled by memories of better times, by stories of their fathers' times when all jungles were free and all *bandhs* open to the general public.<sup>42</sup>

When they lost their lands and forest to *dikus* (outsiders) the communities refused to recognise the loss as legitimate. William Archer, a colonial official at the time, records the ceremonial taking possession of villages by Tana Bhagats, the planting of the Tana Bhagat flag in the village and the reallocation of land among followers. He recorded that to the question 'Where are your title deeds?' the Bhagats replied 'The answer is: my spade, my axe, my ploughshare are my title deeds... ploughing is the writing of the golden pen on golden land'. To the argument 'Your lands have been auctioned for arrears of rent and purchased by another', the reply was 'When a man buys a mat he rolls it up and takes it away, similarly unless the purchaser has rolled up my land and taken it away how can he be said to have purchased them?'<sup>43</sup> This is similar to the native readings of the landscape in Amazonia. As Peter Gow notes the native people of the region were implicated in the landscape through moving around in the landscape and leaving traces on it. It was a lived space and no piece of paper in a far of government office which determined who owned what could transform the people's own complex relationship with the land.<sup>44</sup>

The Tana Bhagat movement is interesting because the Oraon followers adopted vegetarianism and an austere lifestyle and incorporated other Gandhian symbols in an attempt to strengthen their hands against the landlords. It can be argued that the movement's appropriation of the symbols of the national movement helped to promote a feeling of solidarity with a wider struggle against an oppressor state. Gandhi was also understood in terms of the people's own religious consciousness. The *adivasi* world was filled with divine and semi-divine beings and Gandhi was considered a divine force of this type with powers to mediate between the *adivasis* and nature.<sup>45</sup> The people of Chotanagpur were producing their own brand of culture and modernity.

### *Modernity and its discontents*

The second decades of the twentieth century saw the development of a modern political idiom which sought to arrest the marginalisation of the indigenous groups. Through their interactions with colonial institutions a new ethnicity

began to emerge. A pan-*adivasi* identity was asserted under the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, which was started in 1915. It embodied inter-denominational unity of the missions for political purposes.<sup>46</sup> The leaders of this organisation were mainly Christian converts, English educated students belonging to the Munda and Oraon tribes who at times tended towards sectarian behaviour against non-tribal autochthones. The rising *adivasi* consciousness was given impetus by activities of missionaries and by colonial writings which categorised people into essentialised tribal identities with fixed boundaries. One can argue, with some reservation recorded above, as the Comaroffs do in the context of the Tswana, that the 'long conversations with the missionaries had set the terms of the encounter which sought to make Africans through their everyday dress, agriculture, architecture and so on- through formal education ... the various ways in which the culture shown by the churchmen took root in the social terrain of the Tswana to be reinvented or reified into ethnic tradition ... some to be creatively transformed, some to be redeployed to talk back to whites parts of the evangelical message ... giving rise to novel forms of consciousness and action.'<sup>47</sup> However, it must be noted that the growing Christian influence and the activities of missionaries did not result in a revival of tribal traditions; rather there occurred a distancing from tribal ways of life, which began to be seen as primitive. Many of the Christian tribals embraced the language of modernity with zeal.

In 1937, the Unnati Samaj was reorganised as the Adivasi Mahasabha and, for the first time, raised the question of a separate Jharkhand state. The immediate cause of the formation of the Mahasabha was the experience of the first elections held in 1937 under the Government of India act of 1935. The Congress swept the polls and there was a growing realisation among the educated tribals that unless they organised themselves, the Congress would hold sway in Chotanagpur as elsewhere. It was felt that the Congress had little in it to offer the indigenous inhabitants of Chotanagpur and was a party of the *dikus* (foreigners). This provided the impetus for some Christian and non-Christian tribals to join forces under the Adivasi Mahasabha. The Adivasi Mahasabha continued its efforts to forge a pan-tribal identity and also opened up its membership to non-*adivasis* of that region. However, the strict distinction between tribals and non-tribals in the popular mind was to crystallise further after the announcement of the Scheduled Tribes list in 1936. In its manifesto in 1937, the Sabha emphasised unity among the different tribal groups above all. This emphasis on unity was in keeping with a growing understanding that only a broad movement would strengthen the hands of the Sabha vis-à-vis the state. Its expressed objectives were the improvement of the economic and political status of *adivasis* in Chotanagpur.<sup>48</sup> The party was opposed to the Congress in this period and was seen as loyalist by the British. It therefore remained outside the mainstream of nationalist politics.<sup>49</sup> The attitude of the *adivasi* leadership to the Congress in this period was in part because the Congress was seen as a party of the *dikus* which had little respect for tribal tradition and culture. In the 1940s the party gained new support for its

movement from the Muslim League which hoped to establish a corridor through Chotanagpur to link it with east Pakistan. The nature of the relationship between the Congress and the Adivasi Mahasabha can be gauged by the violence which erupted during the elections in 1946. In the elections in the region fights broke out between the Mahasabha and the Congress at various polling stations. In Kunti district five *adivasis* were killed and several injured in the violence, generating widespread condemnation.<sup>50</sup> A renewed period of mistrust and hostility between the Congress and the Adivasi Mahasabha followed.

Events in the preceding period had resulted in ethnic arguments based on the notion of a separate tribal identity losing its force in favour of regionalism, as the Jharkhand party began to embrace the discourse of western modernity. In 1950 the Adivasi Mahasabha was wound up to form the Jharkhand party, which gradually changed its policy vis-à-vis the Congress. The discourse of the new party did not emphasise tribal traditions either ecological or cultural. Instead, there was an abandonment of the old language in favour of a modern one. The party then had to broaden its base and attempted to enlist more non-Scheduled-Tribe members. By the 1950s it was clear that ethnicity alone could not be the basis of a political dialogue in Chotanagpur. The census of 1951 showed that the tribals had become a minority in Chotanagpur. The party was therefore thrown open, at least in principle, (as embodied in its constitution) to all Chotanagpuris. A significant transition from ethnicity to regionalism emerged as the formative factor in the movement. This is not to say that ethnic arguments completely lost their force but only that the Jharkhand party saw it as politically tactful to air more regionally based arguments. Notions of ethnicity had to be reconstituted in different historical moments. The history of cultural contact with the plains peoples, migration both to and from Chotanagpur, and inequality were challenging notions of a pure *adivasi* identity. Many of the more recent migrants into Chotanagpur were in fact poor low caste plains Hindus. It was felt that the new Jharkhand parties had to contend with this change by abandoning the old political language.

The foremost ideologue of the Jharkhand Party in the 1950s was a western-educated Munda, Jaipal Singh. He had been active in the Adivasi Mahasabha and epitomised the new breed of leadership, which was western-educated, Christian and had an urban outlook. As a charismatic leader, he had a large following.<sup>51</sup> Under his leadership, the concept of Jharkhand was enlarged to include all the regions that once formed the Chotanagpur administrative division. The party had decided that it would use constitutional means to achieve its goal. That the policy worked is clear, for the popularity of the party in the 1950s rapidly increased. It swept the polls both in 1952 and 1957, emerging as the major political organisation in the Chotanagpur/Santhal Parganas area. The 1957 elections then saw it extend its influence into Orissa, where it captured five seats. It displayed remarkable unity, and thousands of people turned up at party meetings to show support. However, despite this show of strength, the States Reorganisation

Commission in the mid-1950s turned down the plea for a separate Jharkhand state.

By the late 1950s, the party entered a period of decline. At the leadership level, there was a growing split between the Christian and non-Christian *adivasis* on account of the former controlling high party positions. There was also a growing realisation among the people that the party had failed to deliver the goods. It did not have any concrete agrarian or environmental programme and the leadership was drawn from the high strata of tribal society, that is, mainly from Mundas and Mankis (village headmen) in many parts and from the Manjhi and educated Christians from the Munda and Oraon areas. As agrarian conditions continued to deteriorate new measures were needed to remedy widespread impoverishment, but the party organisation was too weak, and it had no radical programme.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, the search for funds led it into dealing with the hated *diku* class of exploiters. In 1962, the party accepted as member an ex-zamindar of Chotanagpur and appointed a secretary from the money-lending community. In the absence of a clearly articulated programme of a cultural and political revival they were threatened with incorporation by the dominant national party the Congress. By 1962 the Congress, with its programme of *garibi hatao*, actually seemed to be more in tune with mass demands to end poverty. Support for the Congress correspondingly increased with the decline of the Jharkhand party. In the 1962 elections the Jharkhand party was reduced to 20 seats in the Bihar Assembly and it appeared that it could no longer maintain itself as a viable political organisation. The merger of the Jharkhand party with the Congress was thus a natural corollary to these events. Jaipal Singh accepted a portfolio in the Bihar cabinet and many of his supporters never forgot this betrayal.<sup>53</sup> The merger signalled the end of the Jharkhand party as a party of the people and effectively outlawed the radical stream. This showed the success of the dominant ruling party at the centre, the Congress in countering the threat posed by the Jharkhand by affecting a merger, denying *adivasi* claims an authenticity and by reinforcing the claims of the nation state.

A period of dissent followed, with grassroots activists struggling to build a political base. and to articulate a new ethnicity based upon the notion of a separate cultural identity and a remembered past. A radicalisation of politics was inevitable given the increased exploitation of the tribal lands and forests under the Congress regime. Indeed, Congress policy towards tribal areas in the post-independence period had totally alienated the *adivasis*. After 1947, the 'isolationist' thinking of the colonial rulers was heavily criticised by the nationalist state wedded, as it imperial precursors had been, to the ideology of development.<sup>54</sup> The report of the Scheduled-Tribes Commissioner, known as the Dhebar report on the Indian state's policy towards tribals, argued that the British policy of isolating them had resulted in their exploitation.<sup>55</sup> Professor Ghurye, a long time critic of British rule, voiced this change in thinking when he stated that 'the policy of protecting the so called aborigines through the constitutional expedient



of excluded areas or partially excluded areas evoked a protest from politically conscious Indians and was resented by many of them.<sup>56</sup> In a conscious attempt to move away from the British policy towards the tribes, the new policy was unashamedly assimilationist, its professed aim being to draw the tribes into the mainstream of Indian political culture. The aim of the nation state in denying *adivasi* claims to an authenticity recognised the possibilities of such an admission in creating sites of resistance and empowerment and moved swiftly in the post-independence period to crush all such hopes. The consequences of such a policy were predictably disastrous and fuelled more tension in the region.<sup>57</sup> It also paved the way for further violent histories of economic, political and cultural interaction that was to exist alongside with cultures of displacement and transplantation. This was to lead to a new cultural revival and a rearticulation of ancient rhetoric especially that relating to the land.

The government of Bihar pushed ahead with a massive exploitation of the forest and mineral wealth of the region while maintaining in its official 'tribal' policies that the 'tribals' should be allowed to develop according to their own genius. After the 1950s, thousands of acres of *adivasi* land were lost to new industries. The cities of Ranchi, Dhanbad and Jamshedpur continued to grow rapidly through an ever-increasing in-migration of non-*adivasi dikus*. By 1961, there were already half a million migrants in Dhanbad and Singhbhum. There was also an extensive loss of land through sales by *adivasis* to non-*adivasis* not only for business purposes but for erecting residential buildings.<sup>58</sup> The result was an increasing 'de-tribalisation', with communities such as the Bauris becoming descheduled on account of their development as coal miners. The 1971 census disclosed an alarming state of affairs. The percentage of the 'scheduled tribes' in the population of the districts of tribal Bihar had fallen sharply in the decade from 1961: in Ranchi from 61.61 to 58.08, in Singhbhum from 47.31 to 46.12 and in the Santhal Parganas from 38.24 to 36.22. This was not only due to the slow growth rate of the *adivasi* population, which was in fact among the lowest in India, but the influx of people from other parts of Bihar. In this period, struggles to halt these dramatic changes developed under a new leadership and resulted in the creation of political organisations like the Birsa Seva Dal and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). The new political extremism was reflected most clearly in the formation, in 1973, of the JMM, whose object was to form a separate Jharkhand state, end the exploitation of 'tribals' by 'non-tribals', and secure preferential treatment for 'sons of the soil' in the matter of employment. Strategic claims for authentic tribal traditions and histories emerged again in this phase as they helped to create sites for empowerment and resistance. The JMM led large scale movements of protest to regain tribal lands in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1968, a movement among the Santhals in the Santhal Parganas followed, and resulted in, among other developments, the Santhals forcibly harvesting standing crops on lands illegally occupied by moneylenders. The period 1967-74 also saw many struggles under the aegis of the JMM to recover alienated lands from

moneylenders and rich peasants in Chotanagpur, amounting to a renewed assertion of strength of a people long exploited.<sup>59</sup>

A history of this period of obvious exploitation can help us understand the nature of the counter discourse of the *adivasis* in Bihar. Faced with economic and political marginalisation, the *adivasi* leadership in Bihar under the Jharkhand party first sought to assert its political views by emphasising a broad convergence of interests with other non-*adivasi* groups. In a region where the *adivasi*/non-*adivasi* distinction had been blurred through decades of migration and where the poorer parts of the Hindu migrant population were as badly off as their *adivasi* brethren, it would have been politically inept to emphasise only an *adivasi* identity. However, the constitutional policy followed by the Jharkhand party through its embracing the language of modernity and the lack of a radical programme in the countryside soon resulted in its decline and its ultimate merger with the Congress. That this happened with disastrous consequences for the *adivasi* people's struggle in the 1960s is evident from the attempts made in the later 1960s and 1970s to evolve new independent political organisations to meet popular demands and, specifically, the emergence of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha as a radical organisation developing out of the agrarian struggles of the 1960s. This organisation was to attempt a successful cultural revival in the 70s and 80s and to revive the image of the Jharkhand people as the inheritors of their ancestral lands and the forests.

### *The Sacred Grove and cultural revival*

The JMM gave particular emphasis to a cultural revival of *adivasi* rituals related to the land and signalled the revival of the *sahrul puja*. This 'festival of the sacred grove' which was traditionally confined to the villages, now became a grand political event in urban centres, and was accompanied with processions, drum beating and dancing with large crowds lining the streets.<sup>60</sup> In the context of a despoiled landscape, the ritual harked back to the days of an idyllic environmental past. It can be seen as a selective use of memory, where the memory of a pristine environmental past is linked to the solution of contemporary political and economic problems. Given the ecological degradation in Chotanagpur today and the poor state of its village sacred groves, often left with only one remaining tree, this ritual has taken on enormous symbolic significance.<sup>61</sup> It evokes a particular image of the landscape 'older, truer and more directly related to the people' and was used to revive memories of better times and to criticise the inequities of the current regime. The ritual is also a flamboyant assertion of 'tribal' identity and strength and can be compared to the Ramanavami or Moharrum processions<sup>62</sup> in demonstrating militancy.<sup>63</sup> The puja thus became a highly visible, elaborate and ritualised culture of public celebration involving both the performers and the crowds in a collective act articulating the special relationship of the Chotanagpuri peoples with nature and asserting their rights as

true custodians of their lands and forests.<sup>64</sup> It is possible to argue, in this context, as Paul Gilroy does with reference to Bakhtin's theory of narrative when he describes the performance of black expressive cultures, that these performances were an attempt to transform the relationship 'between the performers and the crowd in dialogic rituals so that spectators acquired the active role of participants in collective processes which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolise or even create a community'.<sup>65</sup>

This reinvention of 'tribal' traditions happened, as James Clifford notes, in a complex oppositional context where indigenous populations were threatened by forces of progress and modernity. In-migration had changed the character of Chotanagpur society and by the late nineteenth century it was a society that could not really be categorised as predominantly *adivasi*. However, the Jharkhand movement as a pragmatic means of defence sought to project an *adivasi* identity and they attempted to do so by harking back to an idyllic environmental past and a landscape where their ancestors had left traces and whose spirits still inhabited the land. In their collection of essays, Hobsbawm and Ranger have pointed to ways in which nationalist and ethnic mythologies were historically contingent creations and should be seen as a process. It should be noted that, in recognising ethnicity as a process of construction, we are not seeking to deny its contemporary relevance or the hold it has on the imagination of the peoples of Jharkhand. The use of the term process in this context is to enable us to understand ethnicity as a form of social identity which acquires meaning through a process of conscious assertion and imagining. This is not to say that the communities in Jharkhand did not take up aspects of this identity in order to empower them in the context of a particularly unequal system of power relations.

An understanding of ethnic myths and symbols is thus invaluable for our study. Elements of *adivasi* self-government were also revived or re-invented in the 1970s. The Biasi (assembly) in the Santhal Parganas began to function as a court without fees or pleaders and dealt out simple justice. Traditions of collective farming, preservation of jungles, sacred groves, pastures and common land began to be asserted more forcefully, while common grain pools were also encouraged. There was also a certain amount of distancing from Christian influences which were seen as destructive to tribal traditions. The attitude of the JMM towards non-*adivasis*, however, continues to be ambivalent. While the concept of *diku* is central to the notions of *adivasi* identity and solidarity, the Jharkhand parties today cannot sustain an appeal based on ethnicity alone.<sup>66</sup> Many of the low-caste migrants who arrived in the region in the nineteenth century feel that they have as much a right to be in Chotanagpur as the *adivasis*. Any political programme for Jharkhand therefore has to include these groups. The Jharkhand parties today are, therefore, only partly constituted by ethnic meanings and groupings.

The attitude towards *dikus* is important to our understanding of how the *adivasis* conceptualise themselves and others. Moreover, the concept of *diku*

itself is important, for it amounts to a form of boundary-maintenance.<sup>67</sup> The notion of *diku* has not been a stagnant one in Jharkhand. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as we have seen, there were already clear notions of difference between *dikus* and tribal groups. The *diku* was clearly seen as a recent immigrant and as an outsider and exploiter who seized tribal lands. In more recent times, while the *diku* is still seen as the outsider who occupies all the government jobs, the boundary differences between *dikus* and non-*dikus* are blurring. An *adivasi* identity is emphasised but these boundary mechanisms are breached with ease. Instead, a more regional identity is taking over based on secondary cultural markers, that is, on a shared history of exploitation, a territorial boundary and a shared culture and life style of the *adivasi* groups. The latter is important because, although there is a growing understanding that the future of non-tribals is assured in the envisaged state of Jharkhand, the parties continue to lay importance on tribal culture and ecology. The appeal to voters is made on grounds of a common economic and cultural predicament. Ethnicity continues to have force in Jharkhand to the extent that it is a politically powerful argument against the way in which state and national political arenas are structured in favour of the dominant outsider groups. Thus, although the parties emphasise a regional identity, ethnic arguments continue to be aired at the popular level.<sup>68</sup> Today, for example, the flag of the Jharkhand party is green in colour, deliberately to emphasise the common cultural and ecological heritage of all Jharkhandi *adivasis*, while the election symbol is a *sismandi* (a particular kind of fowl sacrificed to a bonga).<sup>69</sup> *Diku* culture, it is argued attaches little value to either of these symbols. But there is little doubt that a homogenous 'adivasi identity' can no longer be asserted given the history of the region and the impact of low caste Hindu migration though ethnicity continues to rear its head in different guises.<sup>70</sup>

It is not surprising that the main focus of the ire of the Jharkhand parties has been the careless attitude of the Bihar state government with regard to environmental issues in Chotanagpur. One of the most widespread movements in the area in recent times has been motivated against attempts by the Forest Development Corporation to replace *sal* by *sagwan* (teak), since the latter is more valuable as wood in the market. This has grave consequences for the lifestyle of the local people. As we have seen, *sal* products have been useful to them in various ways.<sup>71</sup> There is also a renewed attempt to preserve the sacred groves of the *adivasis* and a growing protest against dam building as at Koel Karo. The effort to prevent the flooding of tribal lands and groves under this project has generated widespread support. The main outcry seems to be directed against the destruction of the sacred groves where the gods reside. In recent years many ethnic movements have legitimised their claims by reference to a global environmentalism (or environmental religion). This involves arguing that the local people are the best stewards of the landscape and have the best claims to control it. What can be clearly seen in the Jharkhand movement, therefore, is a

deep social and psychological commitment to an identity of shared pasts, current predicament and common future.

The cultural struggle being waged in Jharkhand today is essentially a movement directed towards transforming the balance of power in the region. In Gramscian terms, it may be represented as a struggle for hegemony in the cultural and the political arena. It is now recognised that the continuous assertion that 'tribal' areas in India were underdeveloped, and its people 'childlike' and 'primitive' (both in colonial and post-colonial state discourse) is an essential element of the discourse of domination. These terms are not used here in a romantic sense but have associations of cultural backwardness, sexual freedom for women and promiscuity as key markers. Another derogatory term used in reference to the tribes is *jangali*, standing for uncouth or uncivilised, but literally meaning 'forest dweller'.<sup>72</sup> These terms form part of an official discourse that aids compliance towards economic and political domination and legitimises the acceptance of one mode of life and the exclusion or extermination of others. The cultural struggle, therefore, has to contest the binary oppositions on which such legitimation is founded.<sup>73</sup> In this context it is useful to see the contemporary *adivasi* cultural revival as political struggle in the same way as Franz Fanon has done in Algeria.

The discourse of the Jharkhand parties now tackles these issues head on, in an attempt to wrest concessions from an authoritarian Indian state. The emphasis on indigenous culture by Jharkhand leaders like Ram Dayal Munda and its current political clout in the region have ensured that the new political equations being formed today include the Jharkhand parties.<sup>74</sup> In the process counter-claims about the inherent originality or purity of *adivasi* culture are made and the history of acculturation with the dominant Hindu culture of the plains is pushed aside. It is in this moment of struggle, as Bhabha notes, that the 'meanings and symbols of culture are appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew'.<sup>75</sup>

The response of the Bihar state government towards the radicalisation of the Jharkhand parties has been to increase repression. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Birsa Seva Dal, Bihar Prant Hul Jharkhand party and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha were each set up to contest the tyranny of developmentalism and forced modernisation. Their activities were both in the domain of parliamentary politics and outside it. These organisations participated in elections, while their activists were involved in the forcible cropping of *diku* lands, in sabotaging local transport lines and in organising new forest *satyagrahas*.<sup>76</sup> In 1978, resistance to the planting of teak was sparked off when the forest department undertook to plant teak in 2000 hectares of the *sal* forest. Local knowledge that nothing grew under teak, particularly not the grass roots and tubers on which the local wildlife and people subsisted, sparked off the protest. It was also alleged, that since elephants did not eat teak leaves, they would be forced to seek food in areas where crops grew, thus increasing their depredations. The agitators argued that fruit-bearing trees were being cut down to establish teak nurseries, thus depriving the *adivasis*

of a source of food.<sup>77</sup> The problems facing such groups were amply illustrated by the Gua incident in September 1980, when on 4th September police in south-west Singhbhum district moved at the behest of local politicians, mine owners and timber contractors to arrest 4,100 tribals and non-tribals for unlawfully cutting trees.<sup>78</sup> The Morcha was driven underground, only to emerge again in new guises and locations. However, such methods have not had continued success. The situation is changing. More recently, the weakness of the ruling party in Bihar has enabled the Jharkhand parties to revive their organisation and has resulted in the forging of new links with the ruling Janata party. This move by the JMM and the astute political manoeuvring of its leadership has given the movement a new lease of life and renewed its strength at the negotiating table. Despite allegations of corruption and bribery on the part of the current JMM leadership, it appears that the marginal voices of the Jharkhand peoples are finally being heard. It is possible to argue that ethnicity will increasingly dominate Indian politics. As the discourse of the nation state in India becomes increasingly totalising, ethnic politics seeks to express itself more forcefully. Though, as has been argued, one should regard ethnicity as a process, there is little doubt that ethnic argument in Jharkhand has come into its own and has great political relevance. A failure to arrive at some constitutional arrangement will therefore have problematic consequences.

This paper has attempted to show the ways in which the recurring image of an older landscape has served as a powerful metaphor in Chotanagpur's resurgence. It directly fuelled protest movements in the late nineteenth century and was part of a new emotive language as a modern political idiom came to be developed by the Jharkhand parties in the twentieth century. The cultural revival signalled by JMM in the 1970s found expression in the festival of the sacred grove which was to become one of the most important markers of Chotanagpuri identity and the site where larger and more powerful hegemonies were constituted, contested and transformed. The paper is also an illustration of the more general problem of historical research and demonstrates the ways in which a post-modern analysis of cultural categories such as ethnicity can be related to the interpretation of the old realities of power politics.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These writers have argued quite convincingly that ethnicity, i.e., belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group is an invention. Ethnic groups are part of the historical process and though they may pretend to be eternal and essential they are usually of recent origin and eminently pliable and unstable. They thus constantly change and redefine themselves. See Werner Sollors ed., *The invention of ethnicity*, New York, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Leroy Vail ed., *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa*, London, 1989, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> I am aware of the problems of the term as the historian Saul Dubow has noted, 'On

account of its capacity to redefine, absorb, and dissolve problematic concepts like race and class, ethnicity has been referred to by one writer as a sort of lightning rod. Like many portmanteau words ethnic or ethnicity can serve as a euphemistic substitute for other appellations. It has become for example variously synonymous with words like population group, tribe, nation, folk, race.' See Dubow, 'Ethnic euphemisms and racial echoes', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol 20, no 3, September, 1994, p. 356.

<sup>4</sup> The notable exceptions are E. Hirsch and M. O'Hanlon ed., *Anthropology of landscape*, Oxford, 1995; and Barbara Bender ed., *Landscape perspectives*, Providence, 1993. See also Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous geographies: body: sense and place*, London 1994.

<sup>5</sup> While there is work on landscape as political resource and the mythologising of landscapes, the standard trope of western aesthetics and western historiography has been to see it as a national imaginary, as a repository of a nation's nostalgic past. There is little work on the ways in which ideas about the landscape have fuelled ethnic and cultural resistance against the hegemonising discourse of nation-states or seeing its potential in an oppositional context.

<sup>6</sup> See the work of Richard Grove, *Green imperialism*, Cambridge, 1995; Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the forest*, Delhi, 1996; Shivaramakrishnan, 'British imperium and forested zones of anomaly in Bengal, 1767-1833', *Indian economic and social history review*, vol 33, no 3, 1996; Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid histories: Forests, frontiers and oral traditions in western India*, Delhi, (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of a 'tribe' is problematic. The term *adivasi* or original inhabitant rather than 'tribal' is seen as preferable by some historians, notably by David Hardiman, for it is free of the evolutionist implications of the latter term. Hardiman argues that the term *adivasi* relates to a particular historical development: that of the subjugation during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities which before colonial rule has remained free or relatively free from the control of outsiders. The experience generated a spirit of resistance which incorporated a consciousness of the 'adivasi' against the 'outsider'. As he notes the term was used by political activists in the area of Chotanagpur in the 1930s with an aim of forging a new sense of identity among different 'tribal' peoples – a tactic that has enjoyed considerable success. See David Hardiman, *The coming of the devi; adivasi assertion in western India*, Delhi, 1987, p. 15. See also Crispin Bates, 'Lost innocents and loss of innocence', in R.H. Barnes, Andrew Gray and B. Kingsbury ed., *Indigenous peoples of Asia*, Michigan, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> This history had a strong oral tradition and was invoked in cultural terms through songs and proverbs.

<sup>9</sup> See J. and J. Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution, Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in Southern Africa*, Chicago, 1991, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> See the ethnographic writings of S.C. Roy, *The Mundas and their country and Oraon religion and customs*, Calcutta, 1912 and 1917.

<sup>11</sup> As Arjun Appadurai notes, 'native people confined to and by place have never existed'. Quoted in James Clifford, *Routes, travel and translation in the twentieth century*, Harvard, 1997, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Doms who were a semi-tribal community were criminalised in Bihar under the Criminal Tribes Act by the British. See A. Yang, 'The case of the Magadhiya doms' in A. Yang ed., *Crime and criminality in British India*, Tucson, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Classical anthropological theories in the colonial period placed tribes at the bottom of the evolutionary line. As Ernest Gellner notes 'Systematic study of 'primitive' tribes

began first in the hope of utilising them as a kind of time machine as a peep into our own (west) historic past, as providing closer evidence about the early links in the great series.' See Ernest Gellner *Thought and change*, Chicago University Press, 1964, p. 18 f. The logical connections between British evolutionism and the establishment of the British empire are obvious. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other; how anthropology makes its object*, New York, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ranchi survey and settlement report*, Calcutta, 1912.

<sup>16</sup> E.G. Man, *Sonthalia and the Santhals*, Delhi, 1983.

<sup>17</sup> *Ranchi district gazetteer*, p. 121. See also 'Forests of Chotanagpur', *Indian Forester*, 10, 1884, pp. 890-91

<sup>18</sup> For debates on shifting cultivation in the Indian context see Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the forest*. For a comparative study in Africa see H. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting down trees*, London, 1994.

<sup>19</sup> *Jhuri* refers to partner and can mean either man or woman. As many women left as coolies by the 1940s when this song was recorded, the process was common to both sexes. See W.G. Archer, *The blue grove: the poetry of the Oraons*, London, 1940.

<sup>20</sup> Bradley Birt, *The story of an Indian upland*, London, 1910.

<sup>21</sup> As Elwin himself notes in his book *The Baiga*, 1939, he advocated some sort of national park in a wild and largely inaccessible part of the country under the direct control of a Tribes Commissioner. See Verrier Elwin, *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin*, Oxford, 1904, pp. 290-291. See also W.V. Grigson, *The Maria gonds of Bastar*, London, 1949.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that it had no positive influence elsewhere as it surely did in north eastern India among the Naga tribes.

<sup>23</sup> See D. Cosgrove, cited in Stephen Daniels, *Fields of vision, landscape imagery and identity in England and US*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> For recent writings on history, landscape and identity see David Lowenthal, 'British national identity and the English landscape' *Rural history*, 2, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Gow, 'Land, people, paper' in Hirsch and O'Hanlon, *Anthropology of landscape*.

<sup>26</sup> V. Ball, *Tribal and peasant life in nineteenth century*, India, Calcutta, 1880 and H.H. Haines, *The forest flora of Chotanagpur*, Calcutta, 1910.

<sup>27</sup> H.H. Haines, op.cit., p.41.

<sup>28</sup> Leach notes that among the Mende in carving out forest space, men claim that they make farms for women, which 'seems to denote the virgin soil as male and the cultivable space as female' See Leach, 'Women's crops in women's spaces', in E. Croll and D. Parkin ed., *Bush base: forest farm*, London, 1992, pp. 57-76.

<sup>29</sup> In some of the *dhumkarias* a similar slit in the central post supporting the roof could be seen. The central post in one *dhumkhar* visited by Roy had a wooden post with a slit resembling the female organ. Such a post was known as the mistress of the bachelors. See S.C. Roy, *Oraons of Chotanagpur*, Ranchi, 1984 (originally published 1915).

<sup>30</sup> See Daniel Rycroft, 'Born from the soil, indigenous mural aesthetic of the Kherwals in Jharkhand', *Journal of South Asian studies*, August, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> It could be argued, as R. Freeman has done for Malabar, South India, that perceptions of the forest differ according to one's 'class' position. In Malabar he argues that for the elites of settled agricultural regimes 'the forest becomes a symbolic repository for the demonic, antinomian, anti-social of all those lower castes and tribals with whom the higher castes were dependently but ambivalently tied'. See R.Freeman, *Forests and folk, perceptions of nature in swidden regimes of highland Malabar*, Pondicherry, 1994, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> See M. Leach, op.cit. See also, for similar views, Roy Ellen, 'Rhetoric, practice and



incentive in Nuauulu', in Kay Milton ed., *Environmentalism: the view from anthropology*, London, 1993, p. 140.

<sup>33</sup> See Nurit Bird David, 'The original affluent society', *Current Anthropology*, vol 33, no.1.

<sup>34</sup> For an interesting study that attempts such an environmental history see M. Leach and J. Fairhead, *Misreading the African landscape*, Cambridge, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> In his recent reply to Obeyesekere, Sahlins has noted that the post-modern attack on the notion of a bounded and coherent culture has occurred at the very moment when groups such as Maoris, Tibetans, Australian aborigines around the world 'all speak of their culture using that word or some other local equivalent, as a value worthy of respect, commitment and defence' He argues forcefully that no good history can be written without regard for 'ideas, actions and ontologies that are not and never were our own'. M. Sahlins, *How a native thinks*, Chicago, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and memory*, London, 1995, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> See Marshall Sahlins on the notion of remembered landscapes and landscapes of servitude in *Anahulu, the anthropology of history in the kingdom of Hawaii*, Chicago, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> S.C. Roy, *Oraon religion and customs* (1928; reprint Calcutta, 1972) p. 251.

<sup>40</sup> Extract from the confidential diary of the S.P. Ranchi 1919, Political Special, File 1919.

<sup>41</sup> Report of the Commissioner of Chotanagpur, 12th May 1921, Political Special, File 1921.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Poffenburger, 'The resurgence of community forest management in the jungle mahals of West Bengal', in D. Arnold and R. Guha ed., *Nature, culture and Imperialism*, Delhi, 1995, p. 348.

<sup>43</sup> Archer collection MSS eur 236/1.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Gow, 'Land people and paper'.

<sup>45</sup> In Gujarat, the Devi movement of the tribals developed similar links with the national movement, see David Hardiman, *The coming of the Devi*, pp. 168-176.

<sup>46</sup> See K.S. Singh, 'Tribal autonomy movements in Chotanagpur', in K.S. Singh ed., *Tribal movements in India*, vol. 2, Delhi, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> J. and J. Comaroff, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> See *Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj ki varshik Mahasabha ka report aur Chotanagpur Adivasi Sabha ka uthpathi* 1937, pp. 1-14.

<sup>49</sup> Political Special 25.4.1946.

<sup>50</sup> See *Indian Nation* 8.3.46 and *Sentinel* 10.3.46.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Cornelius Ekka Ranchi, April 1992. Ekka remembers going to Jaipal Singh's meeting in 1945, where there was a crowd of nearly 50,000 people.

<sup>52</sup> See K.S. Singh, 'Tribal autonomy movements in Chotanagpur', p.7.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Jharkhand party leader N.E. Horo, Ranchi, April, 1992.

<sup>54</sup> Verrier Elwin noted that at the time 'there was endless talk of tribal development', Elwin, *The tribal world*, p. 299.

<sup>55</sup> For details of these views see S. Corbridge, 'State, tribe and region: policy and politics in India's Jharkhand 1900-1980', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Cambridge.

<sup>56</sup> G.S. Ghurye, *The aborigines, so-called and their future*, Delhi, 1943, p. 293.

<sup>57</sup> This was not just confined to Bihar as Christopher von-Haimendorf has noted a massive invasion of tribal land by outsiders all over India occurred specifically after 1947. See Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf, *Tribes of India: struggle for survival*, Delhi, 1989,

p.39.

<sup>58</sup> See Myron Weiner, *Sons of the soil: Migration and ethnic conflict in India*, Princeton, 1978, pp. 165-175.

<sup>59</sup> For details see R. N. Maharaj and K.G. Iyer, 'Agrarian movement in Dhanbad', in Nirmal Sen Gupta ed., *Fourth World Dynamics: Jharkhand*, Delhi, 1982, pp.165-200.

<sup>60</sup> I was told on a visit to Ranchi town in 1992 that the scale of the Sahrul puja I had witnessed there was a recent phenomenon and an 'invention of tradition' in Hobsbawm's terms. As James Clifford notes, 'throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of 'progress' and 'national' unification. The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies and values are lost, some literally murdered but much has been invented and revived in complex oppositional contexts.' See James Clifford, *Predicament of culture*, Harvard, 1988, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> On the state of India's sacred groves today see, Paul Spencer Sochaczewski, 'God's own pharmacies', *BBC Wildlife*, January 1996, pp. 68-71.

<sup>62</sup> The celebration of the Hindu religious festival of Ramnavami and the Muslim festival of Muharram were often used to assert the strength of these communities in urban areas and sometimes resulted in inter-communal rioting.

<sup>63</sup> A reassertion of traditional cultural practices is an intrinsic element of the economy and political struggles of third world peoples. For many minorities, culture is not a mere superstructure, all too often in an ironic twist of Sartrean phenomenology the physical survival of the minority depends on its cultural variable. As Arif Dirlik argues, cultural struggle is an essential counterpart to political and economic struggle. See *Cultural Critique*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Some scholars studying 'festive culture' have interpreted rituals as manifestations of an evolving folk culture creating meaning and helping people to cope with an alien world, as instruments for the promotion of group solidarity and as public assertions of group power and demands. See Kathleen Neils Conzen, 'Ethnicity as festive culture: nineteenth century German America on parade', in Sollors, *The invention of ethnicity*, p. 46.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Gilroy, *They aint no black in the union jack*, London, 1987, p. 214.

<sup>66</sup> Whereas in 1872, 51.38 % of Chotanagpuris were classified by the British as aboriginals and semi-aboriginals, by 1971 only 30.14% of the region's population belonged to scheduled tribes in Bihar. See *Census of India*, Bihar, 1971.

<sup>67</sup> By mapping the named category of *diku* we can, perhaps, uncover the vocabulary of group differences in the region. What groups call themselves and what they call others is related, of course, both to a language of esteem and a language of insult. Names, as Manning Nash has noted, condense the relevant cultural information into handy social and psychological packages for easy self- and other- identification. See Manning Nash, *The cauldron of ethnicity in the modern world*, Chicago, 1989, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> As Nash notes, 'Ethnicity is a resource in political economic and cultural struggle..... When economic ends are sought (opportunity, wealth and income redistribution or claims to ownership of a national patrimony) the ethnic group may approximate a political class and exhibit a form of class struggle powered by an ethnic ideology, not a false consciousness but often a true appreciation of the existing state of economic affairs.' Nash, *The cauldron of ethnicity*, p. 127.

<sup>69</sup> P.C. Hembram 'Return to the sacred grove', in K.S. Singh ed., *Tribal movements in India*, p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> Homi Bhabha has emphasised the 'hybrid moment of political change where ideas and forms are re-articulated; where there is a negotiation between gender and class where each

formation encounters the displaced'. He argues that the agents of political change are discontinuous, divided subjects caught in conflicting interests and identities. See H. Bhabha, *Location of culture*, London, 1994.

<sup>71</sup> See A.K. Roy, 'Sal means Jharkhand, Saguwan means Bihar', *Sunday* (weekly), Calcutta, April 8th, 1979, pp. 46-47.

<sup>72</sup> See Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Tribes of India*, p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> As Caren Kaplan indicates that 'becoming minor' is not a question of essence (as the stereotypes of minorities in the dominant discourse would want us to believe) but a question of a subject position that can only be identified in 'political terms', that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disfranchisement, social manipulation and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses. It is one of the central tasks of a minority discourse is to define that subject position and explore the strengths and weaknesses, and the affirmations and negations that inhere in it. See Abdul R., Jan Mohammed & David Lloyd, 'Introduction', *Cultural Critique*, Fall 1987.

<sup>74</sup> See Ram Dayal Munda, *Report on Jharkhand*.

<sup>75</sup> Bhabha, *Location of culture*, p.37.

<sup>76</sup> See K.S. Singh, 'Tribal autonomy movements in Chotanagpur', pp. 14-21.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>78</sup> 'Gua massacre of tribals', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XV, 38, 1980.