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Colonial Rule versus Indigenous Knowledge in Bengal's Western Frontier

In India today, indigenous knowledge of the natural environment, particularly the knowledge system of Adivasi communities that derives from lived experience, is still regarded as unscientific. Such knowledge is often not recognized as constituting knowledge at all, a belief that has largely developed out of colonial constructions of Adivasis as primitive, ignorant, backward, and needing to be civilized. In fact, Adivasis had, over generations, evolved a complex system of resource-management in consonance with their natural surroundings, which enabled various communities with very different ways of life to earn their livelihoods in a difficult terrain and also to coexist and share the same space, more or less amicably. Although the precolonial Adivasi economy had limited contacts with the outside world, it was not insulated against non-local influences and practices that were gradually accommodated within the indigenous systems. In contrast, colonial rule and its knowledge regime, by reducing local complexities into a monolithic system, tended to bring about far-reaching changes in Adivasis' relationship with nature. This was done both tacitly, through encouraging the "improvement" of local methods and their replacement with what they believed to be culturally superior practices, and also explicitly through direct intervention in local customs.

This becomes evident, for instance, from the history of the agrarian environment of the Chotanagpur Division and Santal Parganas—the western frontier of the Bengal Presidency—in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Located in the northeastern corner of the Chotanagpur Plateau, this area formed part of the westernmost district of the Bengal Presidency under British colonial rule, and today constitutes the Indian state of Jharkhand. The plateau was home to many different communities, both Adivasi—including the Oraons, Mundas, Gonds, Hos, Santals, Bhuiyas, Bhumijes, Kherias, Paharias, Savaras, and Lodhs—and the Hinduized peasantry, all of whom had a history of migration and movement within this space. By the eighteenth century, despite considerable internal migration within the region, certain communities, particularly those practicing settled cultivation, came to be identified with specific zones.

1909 map of the British Indian Empire. Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas are marked in red. (Edinburgh Geographical Institute, via Wikimedia Commons. Markings added by the author.)



The Precolonial Power Structure

These Adivasi communities were associated, through long-standing economic and cultural links, with various feudalistic state systems that had arisen since the eighth century CE. Even before the advent of the British, this densely-forested region had been regarded as a frontier zone since the Mughal Empire had not considered it worthwhile to draw it into its formal fiscal network because of its low agricultural productivity. Nevertheless, in the sixteenth century, Chotanagpur became a tribute-paying quasi-independent kingdom subordinate to the Mughals. This was accompanied by the gradual intrusion of Hinduized peasantry from the north as local rulers commenced the practice of granting service tenures upon their retainers, thereby creating a class of intermediary landlords. Clearing of forests and the extension of settled cultivation thus occurred, particularly near the centers of state authority in northern Chotanagpur, where the forests had been depleted long

before the arrival of the British. The south, however, remained densely forested well into the nineteenth century. With the gradual extension of British colonial rule in Chotanagpur from the late eighteenth century, the region came to constitute the South-Western Frontier Agency of the early colonial government. During the mid-nineteenth century, it gained in economic and political significance following the large-scale demand for timber to build railways and the discovery of mineral resources.

The claims of the precolonial indigenous states to agricultural produce and military service had affected Adivasi village communities in various ways: significantly, it permitted outsiders to gain access to the villages. Yet, despite exacting tributes from Adivasi subjects, there was little direct interference in the internal domain of the village, either through control over the village community or over production decisions (Das Gupta 2011). Moreover, while the precolonial state asserted its right to special control over and taxation on certain commercially valuable products, forests were not considered to be the property of the indigenous kings or their subordinates. This allowed Adivasis to accommodate their needs within their knowledge of the environment. In contrast, under British rule the government directly intervened in local agrarian practices, particularly in its antipathy to shifting cultivation. It also embarked, first, on a policy of agrarian expansion and, later, on controlling indigenous access to forests. Not only did these policies significantly alter the landscape of the region, but they also sought to limit the diverse ways in which Adivasis depended upon their surroundings.

Modes of Adivasi Agrarian Production

The precolonial Adivasi economy, the outcome of a long evolution in knowledge and practice of adaption and adjustment to their chosen environment, was characterized by an interdependence between forest and agriculture. Food gathering and hunting were integrated with various forms of cultivation. Thanks to this variety and differentiation, Adivasi areas had been less susceptible to food shortages. This interdependence was central to their socio-economic life as it enabled a livelihood, which, although precarious, could ensure subsistence in the context of low population density. The distinction between forest and pasture was often blurred, with clearings becoming forests again on being abandoned.

Within this agrarian environment, consisting of a hilly, forested terrain and a hot, dry climate with low rainfall for most parts of the year, multiple agricultural practices had arisen according to variations in the landforms, control over landscapes, the nature of state power, and belief systems. By the eighteenth century, settled agriculture had come to prevail among the dominant Adivasi groups who had already been absorbed into the revenue collecting apparatus of the indigenous states and inhabited the open, fertile spaces in the plateau which had been cleared of forest cover. This transition may have been aided by the imitation of the agricultural practices of Hinduized peasant communities who had migrated into the region from areas under Mughal administration (Singh 1985, 65).

Throughout Chotanagpur, there were two broad categories of the arable: rice lands and uplands. Uplands were used for pasture or for cultivating more hardy crops such as coarse millets and oilseeds (Ball 1880), though occasionally these were also used for rice cultivation. A form of semi-permanent cultivation was practiced in the steeper slopes which became degraded over time and had to be abandoned periodically. The best uplands yielded an annual crop but inferior lands were fit for cultivation only once every four to five years. In contrast, the best quality rice lands were the fertile agricultural lands located at the bottom of the valleys and in the depressions that were used for winter rice and for linseed, pulses, and barley. Since these were irrigated by reservoirs, streams, and springs they were safe from drought but could be damaged by excess rain. On the other hand, the lower quality rice lands, consisting of embanked paddy lands at the top of the slopes, required a heavy and well-distributed rainfall.

The swift-flowing, seasonal rivers and streams traversing the district were not of much use for irrigation of the uplands and the Adivasi peasantry devised various means to counter the problem of water shortage. For instance, the Mundas and Oraons in the Ranchi region had evolved the method of terracing ridges into fields of various sizes in a step fashion along the contour lines (Depree 1868). Small, temporary embankments were constructed across the bed of a stream which allowed water to be stored high up on the slopes. These were useful in years of average rainfall, yet being dependent on rainfall, they could not be relied upon to prevent food shortages (Tuckey 1920). In other regions these embankments were more sophisticated, having earthenware pipes at their bases that could be opened and closed at will. The worship rituals of the Adivasis and their propitiation of mountain gods demonstrate their very real anxiety concerning annual rainfall (Dalton 1973, 187–88).

Together with settled cultivation, the dominant Adivasi communities also practiced various forms of shifting cultivation in the upland forested areas. Shifting cultivation usually followed fallow cycles, with the same clearings being cultivated after six to eight years, and did not necessarily imply a random destruction of forests as British administrators believed. Since it was based on a relatively backward technology, shifting cultivation was unsuited for intensive farming and usually inferior grains were grown in this manner. Smaller communities, living in more inhospitable areas, combined shifting cultivation with food gathering, hunting, and trade in forest produce. These different modes of subsistence gave rise to specific belief systems among different Adivasi communities. For instance, the Paharias, a community who depended principally upon food gathering, generally refused to clear forests and considered land-clearing agricultural communities to be destroyers of the forest. Their aversion to settled cultivation was rooted in their religious beliefs and they thought of ploughing as a violation of the earth.

Colonial Period: Changes in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Many Adivasi communities had a tradition of displacement and migration within Chotanagpur and, as their folk songs testify, their search for land often brought them in confrontation with other groups. Some Adivasi groups in particular were famed for their skill in clearing jungle for cultivation. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, following western Bengal's devastating famine of 1770, when cultivatable lands had reverted to jungle in many districts, both local landlords and the British government encouraged Adivasi immigration in the hope of effecting agricultural recovery. An outcome of such movement was that shifting cultivators came to be displaced by settled cultivating communities, and in the nineteenth century there were increasing complaints of encroachments into the villages and lands of smaller groups (Sherwill 1851, 589). A significant change that occurred during the colonial period was the curb on shifting cultivation and the control of intra-district migration, leading to greater sedentarization.

British policies were also informed by their ideological beliefs. Until the mid-nineteenth century, colonial rulers had laid greater emphasis on expanding agriculture and clearing forest for cultivation. To the British of the early nineteenth century, agricultural cultivation symbolized civilization, and the wildness of the landscape was ascribed to a primitive mindset and native indolence. Unsurprisingly, cultivated productive areas,

usually located within the realms of Hinduized chiefs, were considered to be “civilized,” whereas the rocky and forested parts, peopled chiefly by Adivasis, were not.

In the nineteenth century, extension of cultivation was noted in almost all the districts controlled both by indigenous landlords and the colonial government. This was accomplished through the reclamation of new land as well as through the cultivation of wastelands. The changing colonial context set in motion a series of adjustments from the local communities. With the increase of population, a process of intensification of cultivation occurred whereby uplands were gradually embanked and converted to rice lands. Hence the cultivation of hardy upland cereals was replaced by wet rice cultivation. There was an increased demand for rice both internally, because of the influx of non-Adivasi peasantry, and externally, which resulted in increased grain trade from the region. By the end of the nineteenth century rice had become by far the most cultivated food crop in Chotanagpur. Although wet rice cultivation required intensive irrigation, this change was not accompanied by any sizeable increase in artificial irrigation facilities. The existing facilities were insufficient and, since these were controlled by landlords they were in any case beyond the reach of poorer Adivasis. The new cultivation thus depended entirely on rainfall.

The intensification of agriculture in the uplands was accompanied by restricted access to forests since the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when demarcating and reserving portions of the forest for exclusive government use was taken up in earnest. The Forest Act VII of 1878 limited forest use all over India, effectively closing parts of the forests to the indigenous people. The need to reserve forest was motivated by the enormously inflated demand for timber at the time, created by the advent of railways. While forests became increasingly restricted for the local people, they were commercialized on a massive scale in the interests of enabling sustained timber production. Restriction to the use of forests also affected the traditional agricultural practices of the Adivasis as large areas of upland, usually used for growing hardy crops, were placed out of reach of ordinary cultivators. British rule thus brought about the separation of forest and cultivation, bringing an end to their complementarity in the Adivasi economy.

The net result was an increasing incidence of famines under colonial rule. Severe droughts in the first half of the nineteenth century had not caused famines or high mortality as the Adivasi subsistence economy could draw sustenance from forest pro-

duce. As access to forests became restricted, famines and starvation deaths occurred regularly. Suffering was greatest in villages where most of the uplands had been converted into rice land. Inevitably, the overall agrarian and ecological crises, as well as chronic indebtedness, compelled Adivasis to leave their lands and migrate. In districts controlled by indigenous landlords, Adivasis were subjected to high rents and usury, and ultimately lost control over agriculture to outsiders and private groups like the British-owned Midnapur Zemindary Company (Chaudhuri 2008, 759).

Colonial knowledge as an instrument of power had an impact even on remote areas peripheral to the empire and on the livelihoods of Adivasis. As this study demonstrates, the introduction of agrarian practices more suitable to lowlands had a disastrous impact upon the agrarian environment of Chotanagpur. This is not to argue that outside influences are necessarily detrimental to a locality. Alien knowledge and practices had hitherto been accommodated within the Adivasi resource-management system in keeping with their lifestyle and needs, but this had very different consequences when imposed on an unprecedented scale under colonial capitalism. By focusing on the subaltern perspectives in Adivasis' use of nature in a historical context, this paper points at the need to rethink the significance of indigenous knowledge systems and their understandings of the natural world.

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