Beyond Subalternity: The Political Aesthetics and Ethics of Adivasi Resistance in Contemporary Jharkhand

1. Introduction

Vignette 1: As I entered the museum at Ranchi's Tribal Research Institute, the familiar dank environs of a sarkari building enveloped me. My eyes took time to adjust to the poorly-lit hall of exotica before me. Slowly, I walked past clay models of Asur, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Ho, and Kharia families with their distinctive dwellings, ornaments, hairdos, and implements, each of them looking defiantly at me through the glass that encased them. These "primitive tribes" that we find today, explained official notices below the glass cases, were vestiges of the earliest hominids that lived in India. They mattered, in other words, because they were simultaneously our respect-worthy ancestors as well as inchoate (or "backward") versions of ourselves. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act, an explanatory note stated, was their "Magna Charta," a charter of rights to lands demarcated as "tribal." It had, in other words, protected tribal land rights since 1908 despite its many loopholes and problems.

Vignette 2: In July 2009, a gigantic map greeted me at the block office in Torpa, a bustling town 60 kilometers away from the state capital Ranchi. Almost half the block, including a section of the Karo river, were demarcated for some purpose. "What's this about?" I asked the babu closest to me. "This is the land meant for Mittal. A big steel plant will come up here. The *jungli* nature of this place will change." It took me a while to digest. Arcelor Mittal, one of the largest steel manufacturers in the world, was acquiring, with the connivance of the state government, hundreds of acres of land meant to be protected by the CNT Act. How could the state let this happen? And why? Activist Dayamani Barla eventually led a campaign against the proposed Mittal steel plant, but there remain over four hundred pending memorandums of understanding

(MoUs), signed by the Jharkhand government with corporate stakeholders in mining, agro-forestry, retail and real estate.

How do adivasi subjects respond to these two faces of the postcolonial state in India? Viewed as primitives trapped in modern state imaginaries, adivasis are typically treated by scholars, activists, and policymakers alike as victims in need of protection or as savages to be civilized through commercial and educational initiatives. Adivasi politics, therefore, gets interpreted vis-a-vis the dramaturgy of postcolonial tragedy or triumphalism. These contradictory images or tropes place the adivasis subject in a "double bind"[1]. On the one hand, playing victim connects one to a wider universe of sympathetic bureaucrats and activists who are ever eager to represent "tribal issues" in the mainstream media. On the other hand, fitting the "savage slot"[2] offers the possibility of remaking local communities on one's terms without falling prey to civilizing missions.

In either case, the political aesthetics[3] and ethics of one's position actively seek to negotiate the terms of subjecthood in ways that are not easily captured by the notion of subalternity. Subalterns, as Ranajit Guha[4] famously argued, are supposed to resist modern states on the basis of pre-existing social solidarities and an autonomous domain of consciousness. Critics of subaltern studies have argued, however, that subaltern protest movements are, in fact, deeply implicated in the symbols and discourses of domination rather than simply constituting an

[1] Prathama Banerjee, "Culture/Politics: The Irresoluble Double-Bind of the Indian Adivasi," *Indian Historical Review* 33 (1), pp. 99-126.
[2] Michel Rolph-Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness," in *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York, 2003), pp. 7-28.
[3] By aesthetics, I do not refer to matters of beauty or pleasure, but to its original Greek sense of *αἰσθητικός or αἰσθάνομαι*, i.e., the sensory perceptions and judgments that undergird political action. Similarly, ethics here refers to the moral character of one's political position.
[4] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1983); cf. Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (New Delhi, 1999); Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins* (New York, 2003).

autonomous political domain[5]. Might it be possible to take this criticism of subalternity seriously and yet appreciate the complex ways in which adivasis subjects in contemporary India resist and negotiate their subjecthood? Can we, then, locate resistance in the process of negotiating states? This paper takes up this challenge by probing into the tropes and strategies by which the contradictory mechanisms and meanings of modern state power have been reworked and resisted in two apparently opposed moments of resistance: the "peaceful" Koel-Karo anti-dam movement of the 1980s and the ongoing "violent" Maoist movement. In doing so, I show how the aesthetics of resistance-as-negotiation are tied inextricably, albeit ironically, to the ethics of adivasi resistance, each acting and reacting upon the other to define the potentialities of and proscriptions on political expression in the margins of the postcolony.

2. Playing Victim: An Anti-Dam Movement in the Margins of Postcolonial India

In 1955-56, the Bihar Government started surveying the villages on the banks of the Koel and Karo rivers. Soma Munda, then studying for his school-leaving examination, recalls a mix of amusement and puzzlement at the sarkari cars driving through dirt tracks to arrive at his village of Lohajimi. “We didn’t know why these upper-caste officials, who did not take food or water from us, had suddenly developed an interest in our area,” he says. Nothing much happened until 1976. This was the year Soma returned to Lohajimi after serving in wars in NEFA, Kashmir, and Bangladesh over a 21-year career as a mechanic in the Indian army. “In Kashmir, I remember an occasion where we needed to set up an army camp. So we simply kicked out the Dogra villagers from there and went about our business without any hassles.” This is, of course, exactly what the

[5] See, for example, Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22 (1), pp. 189-224; K. Sivaramakrishnan, “Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 8 (4), pp. 395-429; cf. Timothy Mitchell, “Everyday Metaphors of Power,” *Theory and Society* 19 (5), pp. 545-77; Lila Abu-Lughod, The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women,” *American Ethnologist*, 17 (1), pp. 41-55; Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, 1999).

Government of India did in 1958 when it set up Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) Limited in Dhurwa on the outskirts of Ranchi. “They did not care,” explains Roylen Gudiya, “that our *sasandiris* (burial stones) and *sarnas* (sacred groves) mean everything for us Mundas. They dispossessed the villagers, stomped all over their lands, and desecrated their ancestral faith.” Sacrificing one’s today for the nation’s brighter tomorrow: this was Nehru’s call to his fellow citizens in the first decade after independence. “No one protested, no one resisted” says Roylen, “they kept quiet because they did not know better." In the margins of the fledgling postcolony, Nehru’s message was merely the cloak that concealed a fresh round of primitive accumulation. Internal colonialism[6], in short, became the currency of domination of the periphery by the centre.

Soma Munda and his fellow villagers were determined not to repeat the mistakes of those who had been displaced by HEC. When in 1976, the Bihar Government sent in engineers and labourers to the banks of the Karo river, Soma used his traditional office as a village headman or *munda* to mobilize people in the “inherently consensual and democratic ways of tribal communities” to resist the proposed hydroelectric dam project in the area. A total of 256 villages in Simdega and Torpa blocks of Ranchi district were to be submerged according to the official plan. Initially, villagers began protesting the influx of casteist Biharis in their midst. They wanted the labor to be done by local workers who would behave decently and eat with them. When their demand went unmet, the newly-formed Karo Jan Sangathan declared a “jan curfew” (people’s curfew): no one would be allowed to enter or exit villages in the proposed dam area. Since the Biharis engineers and workers wouldn’t accept food or water from adivasis and dalits in Lohajimi, they were forced to ask for supplies from the block office in Torpa, over ten kilometers away. “They would bring water in tanks that would stop at the village boundary, from

[6] Sachchidananda Sinha, *The Internal Colony: A Study in Regional Exploitation* (New Delhi, 1973); Victor Das, *Jharkhand: Castle over the Graves* (New Delhi, 1992); cf. Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (London, 1975).

where the junior officers had to carry it in containers into their camps. It was great fun watching them toil in the sun," says Soma. "We were determined to resist and protest, but peacefully. No arms or violence. If we got violent, they'd brand us as extremists (*ugravadi*), kick us out in an instant, and lay claim to all our lands."

As dam-related work proceeded apace, new methods of resistance were called for. For starters, the Jan Sangathans on the Koel and Karo rivers were merged into a single force. Knowing that the state saw them as primitives who worshipped nature in the forests, the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan decided to invoke adivasi custom and law to oppose the dam. Soma says, "We told them that we, adivasis, have only three things: *sasan* (burial stones of ancestors), *sarna* (sacred groves), and the CNT Act. These are tribal lands, which are defined by our religious customs and protected by law. We cannot allow them to be submerged." The government asked the Sangathan if it would be possible to recreate tribal villages elsewhere and rehabilitate these Munda villages with their *sasans* and *sarnas*. They also promised schools and hospitals. After all, dams were the bulwark of the Nehruvian model of development; electricity, employment, education, and health care would follow logically. "In 1987, we said, choose one village along each river, and resettle them according to proper tribal rites and customs. If you can do it, we will let you proceed with your work. Otherwise, you must leave." The government failed to keep its side of the promise, of course. It refused to stop work and leave the area too.

Everyday shrewdness and canny use of customary arrangements became the protestors' chief weapons. Faced with the government's obstinacy, the Sangathan asked villagers to plant corn (*marua*) around the sarkari camps. "They were outwitted," recalls Roylen, "if they stepped on our corn, we could lodge a case against them and demand compensation." Forced to tiptoe in and out of their camps, government officials had started facing the heat of protest. They were

prevented from taking firewood from the nearby forests or purchasing it from villagers. According to the Forest Department, they argued, villagers enjoyed the exclusive right to such use of the forests; outsiders could not the same rights. Next, they were told not to defecate in the village because that would pollute the sacred sarnas. "We compelled them to basically cook, eat, and shit inside their camps." In no time, they left the area under cover of darkness, tormented and humiliated by weaponless adivasis villagers. Soma can barely suppress his smile when he says, "We made the sarkar bend to our will with our reliance on custom, law, and non-violence (*ahimsa*). We don't need to hold any meetings or rallies in Ranchi or Delhi. We are not like Narmada Bachao of Medha Patkar. Our politics is local. We will resist them here on our turf."

In 2003, the Jharkhand Chief Minister Arjun Munda officially scrapped the Koel-Karo project. For a movement led by and for tribal villagers, it was a spectacular success, especially in contrast to the much-vaunted Narmada anti-dam movement led by middle-class activists and celebrity cheerleaders. Not only did the Sangathan speak back to the state in its own language of primitivism, it also read the law back to the state, and thus, obliged it to protect tribal lands from alienation. This kind of strategic approach by claim-making subjects has been termed "rightful resistance" in another context[7]. Such resistance does not seek to negate, but to negotiate particular forms of statemaking in particular contexts. Put differently, everyday forms of resistance[8] used traditionally by peasants against their social superiors are adapted by subjects to a new context of claim-making vis-à-vis the modern state. The performance of resistance-as-negotiation deploys tribal customs in creative ways against a powerful state, yet off stage, participants joke about how their ancestors, who formed these villages two or three centuries

[7] Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge, 2006).
[8] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

ago, did not bring any *sasans* and *sarnas* with them[9]. Negotiating subjects specifically do not resort to illegality and violence in the manner of Partha Chatterjee's "political society"[10]. The logic of resistance-as-negotiation is, therefore, endogenous to that of statemaking, which, ironically, is what makes it effective in achieving its aims.

3. Fitting The Savage Slot: A Tribal Rebellion in the Forests of Jharkhand

The Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan's victory is little known outside Jharkhand partly because it was not led by middle-class activists who revel in giving interviews to national media houses. Yet its success is not appreciated by everyone in the area either. Moses[11], a young man from nearby Tapkara, resents the celebration of custom by older activists. "What has the CNT Act done for us? We have been dispossessed again and again for the past century. Our elders keep acting like the *junglis* the government thinks we are: venerating ancestor spirits (*bhuts*), drinking rice beer (*illi* or *hanria*), making sacrifices of fowl at the time of sowing and harvest. You are an educated person from the city: does anyone in Delhi believe that killing a *murga* will bring more rain to the fields?" Another young Munda man, Benjamin, points to widespread discontent with village elders in Munda villages: "In every village, the young and the old are at odds with each other nowadays. Our tradition (*parampara*) is simply to listen to what the elders say. We must farm for them, our wives and sisters must cook and prepare rice beer for them. What is so good about such traditions?"

These discordant voices shed light on the structural factors operating locally to fuel Maoist activity in the region. Young men do not wish to farm any longer; young women, who

[9] For more on the difference between on and off stage performances, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh, 1959) and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).
[10] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Politics in Most of the World* (New York, 2006).
[11] Name changed to protect the identity of my interlocutor. All the names in this section, unless indicated otherwise, are fictitious.

are prohibited by custom from even touching the plough, want to escape their oppressive patriarchial homes[12] to see the sights and sounds of big cities. Work in Kolkata or Delhi, even for a season, offers spaces of freedom away from the taboos of traditional village life[13]. A Munda girl may fall in love with an Oraon boy before proceeding to marry him. This would be impossible in their respective villages. Under the traditional gerontocracy of adivasi villages, there are clear restrictions against marriages within clans (*killis*) or across tribes (*jatis*). The Maoists do not care about the ethnic and religious identities of comrades who wish to get married. They have a simple ceremony, without the traditional *pahan* (village priest) or rice beer (*illi*), but legitimate nonetheless. The Maoists also offer non-farming, non-traditional career alternatives for young men and women. Guns imply power and modernity. With it, comes cash from rangdari (literally, "road tax" on businesses and wealthy individuals). With cash, comes "angrezi daru" (English liquor, usually whiskey, though beer too at times) and the latest, sleekest motorbikes. Without any other sustainable employment avenues open to these youth in Khunti district, joining "the party" is an offer too good to refuse. To the national media, these men are killers, conmen, cannibals[14]: savages, in sum; yet, for local youth, they are heroes to be admired and emulated.

Once in the party, a young Munda man enters a parallel universe of modern comradeship, in and of itself a critique of traditional village society. The *bhailog* (band of brothers), as they are known locally, are both respected and feared. They participate in campaigns to raise the minimum wage, to ensure MNREGA funds are paid fully and in timely fashion, to help build homes for the poorer villagers, and to redistribute lands illegally held by

[12] Shashank Shekhar Sinha, *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters* (Kolkata, 2005).
[13] See, for example, Alpa Shah, "The labour of love: Seasonal migration from Jharkhand to the brick kilns of other states in India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 40 (1), pp. 91-118.
[14] "A cannibal act to strike terror," *The Hindu*, 15 January 2008, http://www.thehindu.com/2008/01/15/stories/2008011559051600.htm.

non-tribals among the poorest. In Chatra district, the Maoists even offer cheap loans at 2 per cent interest per annum[15]. NGOs working in the state are rarely, if ever, stopped from working for grassroots development. The fiscal structure depends almost entirely from local forms of taxation (rangdari), especially on high-value forest products such as lac[16]. The need to resort to "selective elimination" of an odd policeman, forester or local *bania* (trader) is less common than is assumed, though it certainly does exist. Fear of the gun typically works just as well, if not better, than the gun itself. Often, the greatest critics of Maoist youth are the village elders, natural defenders of the traditional Munda way of life. Soma Munda himself spoke of "misguided youth" and the "romance of violence." Others such as Sukhram Hao, a retired teacher in Khunti tola (hamlet), were more explicit in their condemnation: "These party people are destroying our culture (*sanskriti*). They don't care at all for the past or for us elders. When we were young, we listened to our parents. But our children won't do so. This is the sad state of affairs (*dukhdayak sthiti*) today." The Maoist critique of traditional adivasi society has struck hard at the authority of the village elders. Defiance of customary law and social order comes with a valorization of youth, freedom, and money.

Massi Charan Purty is one of the best-known Maoist figures in Khunti district. His fame has attained the status of folklore after he contested the Jharkhand state elections in December 2009. A shy, intelligent boy educated by Catholic missionaries, Massi went on to Ranchi to pursue a B.Com degree. However, in 2003, he found his family embroiled in a land dispute with the village *munda* (headman), who boasted local police connections. As the risk of losing his family plot loomed, Masi found support from the local MCC unit and took on his neighbors

[15] "Now Naxals offer hassle-free banking for poor," *Hindustan Times* (Ranchi), 21 May, 2009, p. 7.
[16] I have addressed Maoist fiscal structure in a separate (unpublished) paper titled "What Lac Tells Us About The Political Economy of Maoist India." For a similar perspective on *tendu patta* taxation systems in Telengana, see Bert Suykens, "Diffuse Authority in the Beedi Commodity Chain: Naxalite and State Governance in Tribal Telangana, India," *Development and Change* 41 (1), pp. 153-78.

successfully. Then, he joined the MCC headed locally by the charismatic Kundan Pahan[17]. After a stunning break-in at the women's remand home at Hatia, barely five kilometers from the state capital Ranchi, Massi led an operation to rescue his female comrades as well as his soon-to-be wife Protima. Hailing from a village on the Assam-Meghalaya border, Protima found it hard to adjust to the rigors of jungle life and Maoist discipline. She told me: "We couldn't even talk to each other like we are now. We didn't feel a personal connection with them. One day, five of us, including Massi and me, ran away from the MCC and came back to our village here in Bandgaon. We started our own group, settling old scores with the local *munda* and ensuring people like us could hold onto their land without the elders deciding everything."

This new breakaway group was named the Jharkhand Liberation Tigers (JLT), though they are now called the People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI) to indicate their national ambition. In reality, the PLFI operates in three blocks in Khunti district[18]. Massi has been in jail since 2008; the PLFI supports his wife and two sons, paying for their daily expenses and school fees. Popular belief suggests that he actually won the Khunti MLA seat on a JMM ticket in 2009, but bribery and rigging helped his BJP rival Nilkanth Singh Munda win officially by 438 votes. Today, Massi is a modern Munda youth icon: he married whom he wishes regardless of ethnicity/religion; he used the power of his gun to fight for the poor; he settled land disputes extra-judicially against the interests of wily *sadan* (non-tribal) zamindars and policemen in their pay; he drinks English liquor and refrains from participating in mind-numbing rituals. This is the example through which his followers wish to remake village communities in Khunti district.

[17] Kundan was in the news briefly in mid-2009 for beheading a rogue policeman named Francis Induvar: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/india/Maoists-behead-abducted-cop-after-govt-refuses-to-free-Ghandy/articleshow/5092919.cms.

[18] They share an uneasy coexistence with the MCC in the district, the border between them running through the heart of Arki block in Khunti district.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown two different ways by which adivasi subjects respond to two faces of the postcolonial Indian state. They can play helpless victims for the state and civil society in order to make claims on them vis-à-vis the complementary domains of custom and law. Yet they can also fit the savage slot by invoking the bloodthirsty image of the tribal rebel[19]. Academic scholarship and media coverage routinely replicate, circulate, and legitimize these images, reifying them as the "truth" about tribes as quintessential subaltern actors. Scraping beneath the surface, however, we may appreciate how the two-faced tribal subject discovered by our pundits may be a mirror image of the duplicitous state in the margins of postcolonial India[20]. The state pledges to protect tribal land rights and empower tribal democracy, yet it also steals the minerals and forests around their dwellings and auctions off their lands to the highest bidder. Thereafter, the tribal subject is constituted as "poor," and hence, a worthy object for the multi-million dollar poverty industry. Cunningly, the state is described as "absent"[21] in tribal areas, but, in fact, it may be omnipresent. It suffuses the processes of self-making and community-making for tribal subjects, causing them to mirror the two-facedness of the state.

The intergenerational struggles within Munda villages in Khunti district today blur the distinction between the everyday state and society[22]. Whereas village elders resort to their customary privileges to defend an older vision of tribal community, adivasi youth are determined to remake the community in their own image. Their two-pronged negotiations with a duplicitous state lead them to articulate competing yet curiously complementary notions of ethical political

[19] For a deeper discussion of what's obscured by this image of the tribal rebel, see the introductory essay in Crispin Bates and Alpa Shah (eds.), *Savage Attack: Adivasis and Insurgency in India* (London, forthcoming [2012]).
[20] Diane M. Nelson, "Anthropologist Discovers Legendary Two-Faced Indian! Margins, the State, and Duplicity in Postwar Guatemala," in Veena Das and Deborah Poole (eds.), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, 2004), pp. 117-40.
[21] Neelesh Misra and Rahul Pandita, *The Absent State: Insurgency as an Excuse for Misgovernance* (New Delhi, 2011).
[22] Chris J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (New Delhi, 2000).

action. It is easy to tell how peaceful and violent repertoires of resistance compete with each other. Nonetheless, it is easy for activists and scholars, forever searching for the coherent primitive subject in modern India, miss out on how these interlocking political strategies enable subject communities negotiate their subjecthood. After all, we are not speaking here of the "elementary aspects of peasant insurgency" in contemporary India. Instead, we are locating resistance in the process of negotiating the modern state: the contradictory tropes and images generated by statemaking practices define adivasi political subjectivities recursively, thereby leading these marginal subjects to constantly rework state logics and languages and to remake their "communities" in agentive moments of resistance. The aesthetics of resistance-as-negotiation are, therefore, tied inextricably, albeit ironically, to the ethics of adivasi resistance, the interplay between the two defining the potentialities of and proscriptions on political expression in the margins of the postcolony.