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Forest People, Modern People
Modernity and Social Change among the Ho and Munda People of Jharkhand

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In the relevant Indian literature, Sanskritization and Westernization constitute two related yet different phenomena. First introduced by Srinivas,[1] the term Sankritization refers to the process by which low caste Hindus imitate and adopt the moral values and codes of behaviour of high-caste Hindus to raise their social status. Thus, 'Sanskritization can be seen not only as an idiom of mobility but also as an important source of *continuity with the past*. Its symbols and values are essentially those of the traditional order.[2] By contrast, when 'the modern secular social order provides *alternative symbols and values* which are likely to become increasingly important in the future', we can talk of Westernization.[3]

In the same line, Dumont had noted how low-caste Hindus tend to *sanskritize* where upper-caste ones *westernize* instead: 'caste values envelop and encompass modern ferments. One could find no better demonstration... of how powerless are modern education and social and political transformation *to overthrow the traditional system'* [4] (emphasis mine).

Westernization and modernization are often used as synonymous in the Indian literature. And both are generally put in opposition to Sanskritization: 'At a time when a *modernist* élite is trying to push the country towards a secular and *Westernized* social order, ... those who had in the past occupied a fairly low social position may set themselves up as the bastions of social values [i.e. they Sanskritize]'[5] (emphasis mine).

The present paper gives ethnographic evidence of a specular case. By adopting the perspective of the people under study, the present paper deals with a case in which people, by imitating and adopting moral values and codes of behaviour of high-caste Hindus, not only *sanskritize* but also *modernize.*

The paper deals with the Munda and Ho people of a forested village in Porahat area, in the district of West Singhbhum in Jharkhand in central India. Hos and Mundas are classified as Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution, and share a common language, territory and cultural traits with only slight differences. The purpose of this paper is to show how, from the perspective of the people under study, adoption of 'caste values' does indeed correspond to an 'overthrow of the traditional [tribal] system'. To be able to claim a higher status, people must reject their own past, both symbolically and practically. And they find in caste values a new, *modern*, continuity and source of legitimacy.

As Deliege remarked about the Bhils of Western India:[6] 'When a tribal section becomes more Hinduised, it ... becomes ashamed of its [habits and customs] and tries to deny or conceal them. This sense of inferiority ... is perhaps the best indicator of a transformation of a tribal group into a caste since it denotes a loss of its dignity, its pride, its sense of equality and its independence'. In the case under study, higher-status claims are encouraged and legitimised by conversion to a *Bhagat* movement locally defined as *Shiuli dharom.*[7] *Bhagat* movements constitute a common means for Sanskritization and represent a widespread phenomenon in India among low-caste Hindus and tribal people. They are devotional movements which normally require their followers to subscribe to upper-caste practices and to completely reject 'tribal' or low-caste norms and rituals.

Although both Hos and Mundas can convert and become followers, it is however a fact that the *Shiuli dharom* has historically been associated mainly with the Mundas.[8] Through conversion, Mundas attempt to 'liberate' themselves from their 'shameful' past, at least ideologically if not in practice. Notwithstanding the obvious continuity in daily practices, Mundas publicly and explicitly reject their 'habits and customs'. At the same time, they adopt and imitate high-caste Hindus'

values and practices, perceived as vehicles for 'civilisation' and modernity.

Conversion to the *dharom* leads to the crystallization of caste boundaries between Hos and Mundas, who used to be 'of the same kind', and the development of a new 'kind' of people among the converts. By claiming a higher social status vis-à-vis the Hos and the non-converts, the Mundas are transforming flexible social and cultural distinctions into rigid and clear-cut boundaries, with both intermarriages and commensality being strictly prohibited. The distinction has a political counterpart, too.[9] Hos support the Jharkhand ('Land of forest') political party, which has been fighting for tribal autonomy from the Bihar state since the end of the nineteenth century,[10] whilst Mundas sympathise with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party.[11] As we shall see, this divergence in political preferences reflects opposed sources of legitimacy: on the one hand, the forest, its spirits, and the ancestors, on the other, the State and the 'modern' world.

A Social Forgetting of the Past

Since the very first days of my eighteen-month fieldwork in a forested village of Jharkhand, *Shiuli*[12] converts kept on emphasising their differences vis-à-vis the non-converts: could not I see how *modern* and *civilized* they were, compared to the others? I remember paying almost no attention to those statements. I was looking for 'the real stuff' and 'exotic curiosities', and not for people claiming to be westernized! However, I was soon to realise how ethnocentric my assumption was. The model for modernity was not given by the Western world, but by moral values and codes of behaviour of high-caste Hindus and by the life-style of the cities.

The main change brought about by conversion to *dharom* consists in the replacement of affines with Hindu specialists to perform rites of passage. According to the Mundas, only Hindu specialists can 'clean' (*sappa*) dirt away. It is however my suggestion that what they really wipe away from their bodies, houses and landscape, are not just ritual impurities but what they

referred to as 'the rule from the past', 'the path of the ancestors', or again as the 'words of the old ones'.

Conversion also implies a radical change in religious beliefs and practices. *Bhagat* movements generally act as powerful vehicles for disseminating modern reformist hostility to animal sacrifice and the *Shiuli dharom* constitutes no exception. From their onset, the traditional faith generally declines and new gods and beliefs are introduced: 'A Bhagat is basically one who has consciously renounced faith in the primitive cult, labelled animistic, and developed faith in Hindu gods and the associated religious principles. Further, he is one who has given up many old practices and taken to new ones which are considered essential requirements of the new faith'.[13]

Converts have abandoned the ritual offering of animals by adopting vegetarian deities. Carnivorous spirits are stripped off of their benevolent nature and are dreadfully feared. People would carefully avoid even talking about them. In other words, their existence is acknowledged, but they are neither appeased nor dealt with. Similarly, collective festivals are rejected, with old and young generations of converts not joining their dances and songs and observing them from a distance only.

The giving up of alcohol drinking represents a similarly explicit step towards Sanskritization. Rice-beer plays a fundamental role both in religious practices and social domain too. The preparing and the sharing of rice-beer *de facto* creates 'relatedness'. Not only rice-beer is indicated as a marker of tribal identity, but the mythological and primordial incest between siblings, which gave rise to humankind, was also beleived to have been both caused and excused by rice-beer intoxication.[14] By rejecting its use, people not only create distinctiveness, but further crystallize the boundary between past and present.

The main break with tradition is however represented by the rejection of ancestors' worship and clan graveyards. *Converts* have also abandoned the 'Calling of the soul' ceremony, which ritually connects the kitchen, abode of the soul of ancestors, with the clan cemetery. Both kitchen and graveyards produce and negotiate clan memberships, being symbolic spaces for social reproduction and continuity between the dead and the living.

Converts have substituted the ceremony with different practices performed by Hindu specialists. When they die, they become malevolent spirits rather than benevolent ancestors. Instead of being ritually *called back* in their houses, the 'old and sleeping ones', as they are also called, undergo a collective process of 'social forgetting', and my simple mentioning of them was often a cause of embarrassment–and seen as source of danger. Old kitchens need periodical and weekly blessings and in some cases they are destroyed altogether at the time of the household's conversion and substituted by new ones.

Similarly, most converts fear clan graveyards and would avoid crossing them especially after dark. This attitude clearly contrasts with that of non-converts, who would instead conduct many social activities precisely within graveyards' boundaries. More importantly, converts have stopped burying their dead in their clan graveyards. These have been substituted by individual tombs made of cement and placed in households' gardens instead. People see them as a sign of 'modernity' and as something that 'people of the town' have.

To them, what really matters is not the sharing of a common burial ground after death, but that of a common place of worship during life. The sharing of different sacred spaces produces different social memberships and religious affiliations replace clan ties. It is not graveyards but *Shiuli* temples that reflect or negotiate people's social affiliations. It is not the past, i.e. ancestors and their bones, that legitimizes the present, but the present that legitimizes itself through a new set of rules, codes of behaviours and a new sacred landscape.

The rejection of clan graveyards as sacred spaces is accompanied by a parallel denial of them as legal evidence of land possession. The more old a graveyard is, the more the presence of a clan in the territory is locally legitimized. The sacred link between people and land starts with the transformation of virgin tracts of forest into cultivable land, in the subsequent preparation of the soil for cultivation, in the growing and harvesting of paddy, in the nurturing of one household's members with it, and ends with the burying of human remains in the clan's land and the calling back of their souls into the house. Clan graveyards then stand as icons of the

sacred relationship between people and land. The same relationship has a political dimension, too, as clan graveyards are conceptualized as legal evidence of territorial belonging and land rights. People would constantly refer to their past to legitimize their present, hence our need to look at history to understand the 'here and now'.

The nineteenth century was characterized by tribal revolts against land dispossession caused by the colonial codification[15] which transformed rajas into landlords and symbolic contributions into payments of rent. The Porahat area in particular was the centre of some of the major tribal revolts in Chotanagpur such as the great Kol rebellion of 1832, the Sardar *Andolan* and the Birsa *Andolan* of 1895-1900. In the village under study, '*the money was never paid ... and from 1830 to 1836 the whole body of aboriginals resisted all attempts to realise rent, and waged war on the claimants ... because of the attempt of the tenure-holder to destroy* [land] *rights amongst them, through the imposition of the plough tax and the introduction of diku* [non-tribal] *headmen*'.[16]

What people were resisting to was not only the payment of rent but the policy of the Forest department. From the 1840s onwards the East India Company attempted to exercise a monopoly right of timber extraction from the forests. At the end of the century, forest reserves were established under the control of the Forest department. Shifting cultivation was seen as a destructive practice, forest officials sought to encourage sedentarism.

People used clan graveyards as title deeds, i.e. as evidence of their belonging to those lands, hence of those lands belonging to them. The British eventually understood the indigenous concept and used it as criterion for their records of rights. The presence of clan graveyards became sufficient proof of 'prior ownership of the jungle' during the settlement and record-of-rights operations of 1903-7.[17]

In this way, the spiritual and ritual connection between land and people acquired *de jure* meanings with the British. The indigenous notion was accorded legal status and was considered as sufficient evidence for everlasting legal rights on all land cleared and prepared by them or their ancestors, unless they had

sold their interest, and for colonising rights as well as a privileged fiscal status.

Although the British recognised indigenous customs concerning land and forest, and went as far as to codify them in the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, they eventually gave priority to forest conservation and commercialization.[18] In 1895 they classified all forests of Singhbhum into Village, Reserved and Protected Forests, and forcibly evacuated many villages that 'happened' to lie within the last two.[19] The reservation of forests and the consequent forceful eviction of pioneers from their villages was the immediate reason for the insurgence of the Birsa *Andolan* in the Porahat area.

Besides dispossessing the people of their land, the British eventually replaced graveyards with land records as the only legally recognised and valid proof of land ownership. Although land records were initially compiled according to the 'graveyard proof', written papers were meant by the British bureaucracy to replace the ancestral source of legitimacy as title deeds. After the 1907 settlement, in fact, they purposely denied land rights even to those who passed the 'graveyard proof' in order to make the new kind of legitimacy effective.[20]

After Independence, the Bihar government resumed the British policy of forest management. Moreover, in the name of environmental conservation, it imposed state monopolies and new restrictions in the use of forest products. Irrespective of the fact that the livelihood of local people depended almost entirely on forest products, the Bihar government gave big portions of Reserved and Protected Forest of Porahat on lease to a private corporation at the beginning of the 1960s. The 'Corporation' had exclusive rights on the cutting, collection and selling of wood and other forest products. Not only local people had no access to forest resources, but they also received no share from the sale.

As people recall, the Corporation soon eradicated all sal (sacred) trees (Shorea Robusta) as well as other trees and plants essential for the survival of tribals. The Singhbhum forest used to be known as one of the biggest sal tree forest of the world. Today it has almost completely disappeared, because of the state and tribals' exploitation. Once sal trees were eradicated, teak trees were planted in their place, because of their high

commercial price and their fast growth. Yet, they do not allow the underwood to grow; so that leaves, roots and mushrooms almost disappeared from tribal diet, and wild animals migrated. People would recall those times by saying that they had nothing to eat, because the 'forest was finishing' (*buru chabakerae:).*

Local men and women were employed to cut, transplant and collect timber. Half of these labourers' salaries were paid with money and half in wheat. Because forest products were not available anymore, and people worked for the Corporation, paddy fields were progressively abandoned. Thus, tribals' survival relied almost exclusively on the Corporation's wheat.

In 1978 they eventually rose into open revolt against the Corporation and local government officials, when the wheat, that labourers received as monthly payment, was found to be spoiled and rotten, hence inedible. People reacted violently by demolishing Forest bungalows and attacking forest guards, contractors and local authorities. That was the beginning of the so-called *Jangol andolan*, or 'Jungle uprising', which eventually extended to all other forested areas of Singhbhum district.

The conflict between state and tribals reached its peak in the middle of the 1980s. Police forces drove people away from their re-settlements. People of the village under study would proudly recall the way they faced the army with bows and arrows adding that they would do the same nowadays, was the Jharkhand party to fail in claiming their land back from the government.

Today rights on land and forest still represent the main cause of tension between tribal people and the State and graveyards are still used as title-deeds against government's claims. Their modes of resistance consist in tree-cutting activities and illegal occupation of old and newly-cleared settlements. Old graveyards identify ancient villages covered by jungle and people would resettle them. By doing so, they assert their colonizing rights and the authority of the ancestors.

Today non-converts are still fighting against the State (*sarkar*). Be it Indian or British, the State has historically been considered an enemy, belonging to the 'outside' world, or '*diku disum*' (*diku*: outsider: *disum*: territory). People who do not live in the forest, do not cut trees and do not have graveyards are usually defined as *diku*. They are conceptualized as people who

live in big cities, are educated, wear spectacles and speak Hindi. City-dwellers and government officials are all commonly identified as such. They are described as untruthful, cunning and cheating people.

At the same time, however, *dikus* embody modernity. Modernity is mainly talked about in terms related to cooking and eating habits: both British officials and people of the city are said to use forks and knives rather than hands for eating; they are said to eat white rice and not brown one; to cook with oil and chillies; to look for the 'quality' of their food and not for the 'quantity' of it, and so on.

Converts conceptualize the forest and its dwellers as being at the periphery and margins of society. So they are shifting their loyalty to the State. They have replaced graveyards with land records as proof of land possession. They reject tree-cutting activities and have abandoned the tribal fight against the State. As they say, the forest is an 'Indian national property', and tree cutting activities are not something to be proud of.

Ultimately, *converts* perceive the way people relate to the forest as a source of caste connotations. In the area under study, different kinds of landscape connote different kinds of people, with environmental boundaries corresponding to cultural ones, with small differences in language, pronunciation and customs. Hence, the *Bir-hoko* are those people (*hoko*) who live in the deep forest (*bir*), and perform hunting-and gathering activities; *Buru-hoko* are those who live in the secondary forest (*buru*), and practise slush-and-burn cultivation; and *Hoko* are those who live in permanent villages and practice settled cultivation.

Converts envisage the continuum in evolutionary terms, with 'civilisation' being equated to the 'outside' world, and 'wilderness' equated to 'backwardness'. The Mundas place themselves at the top of this hierarchy, i.e. at the far end of the continuum, while the *Bir-hoko* are the most stigmatised. *Converts* would admit that once upon a time their ancestors were in fact *bir-hoko* and that they must have been the 'same kind' of people as they speak the same language and have identical clan names. While talking about it, they would show some shame but also be proud for the way they managed to 'progress' vis-à-vis

the others, who have remained 'half naked, simple-minded and even fool, with poor cooking habits and uneducated'.

Again I believe that both historical reconstruction and the historical imagination can shed interesting insights in the issue. British officials would invariably be talked about as the ultimate representation of 'civilization'. They would be remembered as wearing trousers and eating with forks and knives, a sign, as they would say, of 'modernity'. In addition, their immense power would also be highlighted: tribals carrying colonial officials on their own shoulders for miles and miles, and the threat of extremely painful physical punishments or imprisonment constitute unanimous recollections of the British time.

In colonial understandings, tribes were not barbaric but savage, i.e. they were considered as outside of, or better, before civilization. Hence the colonial paternalistic tones and the identification of tribal people as honest, naive and genuine. As the colonisers had the mastery and conservation of the forest as one of their 'civilising' missions, this was to be obtained through the separation of tribes from forests.

With Independence, the unity of the nation was emphasized and 'tribals' or 'jungli people' became for some to be a source of shame, to be 'civilised' as soon as possible. The *converts* today appear to hold the same notion. Whereas some villagers organised an armed resistance to such transformation, as we saw above, others have instead bought the 'new' ideology. These are those who eventually adopted the *dharom* and who replaced local forest gods with a superior, vegetarian and masculine one, Buddha, a god of the city, who does not belong to the forest.[21]

The detachment of converts from local spirits and ideologies probably contributed to their absorption of the colonial 'enchantments'. Local modes of production became associated with backwardness and the forest acquired a prevalent negative dimension. Indeed, it is only among the converts that we find heads of village, who acted as mediators with the colonial administration, and civil servants (forest guards and teachers). This allowed for an additional source of income independent from seasonal variability and a means for money-lending activities.[22]

Still today, the clearing of forest and the making of new fields are not primary issues for *Converts,* at least for some of them. They have permanent or seasonal stalls in the local market place and have been able to secure an additional source of income and do not depend on harvesting alone. Moreover, *converts,* and only *converts,* have government jobs, either as teachers or forest guards. The making of new fields for the new generation is not envisaged, and other kinds of investments are privileged instead.

Converts are the best educated, some of them having lived for years in town hostels. Even at a later stage in their life, they are those who go to town quite often, even if only for getting their pensions. They own radios and bicycles. They move outside the village more often and easily, hence they do 'know' and imitate the life-style of town people. Some young *converts* told me they will sell their fathers' properties after their death to go and live in the cities. They are, in a sense, the most lured by life in the cities, and the most ashamed by their being or having once been *buru-hoko.*

By detaching themselves from the forest both as a mode of subsistence, as an identity marker and as a spiritual source, it is my suggestion that the *converts* developed a different worldview from the one based on the above-described 'ideology of graveyards' (which revolves around the relation between land and local spirits and which ultimately represents a claim for recognition of primordial pioneering rights). Still today, what they strive for is not the transformation of forest into new cultivable fields, but jobs in the public service, a higher status among their tribal and non-tribal colleagues, and their not being depicted as forest people anymore. Or a passage from forest pride to forest shame.

Ultimately, the 'new' criteria for social status are linked the 'new' concept of wilderness: disassociated from power, the 'land of the forest' is identified instead with marginality, ignorance, backwardness and subordination, whereas 'the land of the plains' is equated with 'civilisation', a space for modernity, sophistication and progress.

To the *converts,* to be 'modern' means to socially and ritually differentiate themselves from the 'forest people'. By

sanskritizing, i.e. by adhering to values and behaviours of high-caste Hindus, they become more and more similar to the *dikus*, or a different kind of people. Ultimately, criteria for social status are linked to concepts of *civilization* vs. *wilderness*: disassociated from power, the 'land of the forest' is identified instead with marginality, ignorance, backwardness and subordination. By contrast, 'the land of the plains' is equated with 'civilisation', a space for sophistication, progress and ultimately, modernity.

Notes and References

1. M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India,* Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1966.
2. A. Béteille, 'Society and Politics in India', London School of Economics, *Monographs on Social Anthropology* No. 63, Delhi, 1997, p.165.
3. *Ibid.*, p.162.
4. L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 224.
5. Béteille, Society and Politics, p. 165.
6. R. Deliege, *The Bhils of Western India* : Some Empirical and Theoretical Issues in Anthropology in India, National, Delhi, 1985, p. 160.
7. The *Shiuli dharom* entered the village in the 1930s. *Shiuli* is the name of the village, where it originated, in Gaya district, Bihar. *Dharom* means cosmic or moral order, religion in Hindi.
8. The reasons for such association of Mundas with the *dharom* are quite complex and constitute the subject of a different paper. Moreover, they have no relevance for the purpose of the present paper.
9. Although in practice, social, religious and political distinctions are not so clear-cut, it is however my belief that some general trends do in fact exist.
10. The Jharkhand party represents the 'modern' development of the Birsa Munda millennial movement, which developed in 1895 in the area under study, the Singhbhum district of South Bihar, as a revolt against land and forest dispossession.
11. Apparently in contrast to its nationalist ideology, the BJP fostered the idea of a separate state, in order to penetrate the tribal vote bank. This is called *Vananchal* ('Land of forest', in Hindi)

geographically similar but politically and ideologically opposed to the *Jharkhand*. Eventually, the Jharkhand/Vananchal state was carved out of South Bihar on 15 November 2000.

12. The term *Converts* refers to those members of the Munda and Ho caste who converted to the *Shiuli dharom*. Because the majority of the households who converted belong to the Munda caste, the term generally–but not always-identifies Munda people. Moreover, as we shall see, religious affiliation to the *dharom* is invested with caste connotations, so that Ho converts are *de facto* Mundas, and Munda non-converts are perceived as *transforming* into Hos.

13. K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol. 2, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1983, p. 313.

14. Rice-beer pertains to the feminine domain. Women only know how to prepare it and which roots to use from the forest. By rejecting its use, *converts* are *de facto* threatening feminine power. It is not a coincidence that women play a key role in the movement of resistance against conversion.

15. In particular the Bengal Permanent Settlement of 1793.

16. T.S. McPherson, Final Report on the Operations for the Preparation of a record of rights in Pargana Porahat, district Singhbhum 1905-1907, Calcutta, 1908, p.18.

17. Porahat Settlement 1906-7, Settlement officers' notes on khuntkatti rights in Porahat Estate, File n.1. E. Lister, Settlement Officer, To: Commissioner of CN, 9.12.05: *'The tendency seems to be to take the existence of a graveyard, once it has been ascertained to cover the corpse of the ancestor of the man who claims it and has not been shown to have been forcibly or fraudulently set up, as practically conclusive proof'*.

18. The Forest Department-Correspondence files in the District Record Room of Chaibasa, headquarters of West Singhbhum district, testify the British officials' conservationist and environmental concerns. At the same time, however, they also document the fact that the forest was primarily a source of timber for railways' construction of and for commercial purposes.

19. See for instance the following extract from hand-written field-notes of Settlement Officers during the Operation of 1903-07: 'There is now very little jungle (comparatively speaking) to be brought under cultivation. What there is has practically been taken for 'protected forests', and it is probably best for all that what has been left out should be preserved as long as possible – which will not be long in any case ... 'The one great encroachment in their rights, (and although it by no means affected all of them it created a general

feeling of dissatisfaction and of distrust of Government which it will take long to line down) was the constitution of the reserved forests in the course of which the tenants were evicted from a considerable number of villages, thereby of course ... their khuntkatti status, for which the grant of raiyati lands elsewhere can never compensate them. Several have asked me whether they would not be able to go back and it is the fear that they will eventually be excluded from the protected forests as they are from the reserved forest that has been at the bottom of most of the opposition to the demarcation'.

20. See for instance the following extract from the above-mentioned hand-written note: 'Even at the risk of interference with ancient custom I think that a rule should be made that no one on whom a right to erect a graveyard is confirmed in future shall in this district be recognised as mundari, whether by adoption into the village family or by the grant by a village family of a ... lean of uncultivated land. Such a course may have been very recently in days gone by where the clearing has been done, but I think that in the future the abuses are likely to outweigh the advantages'.

21. Similar religious crisis following British-induced transformations have been observed among other tribal populations of northern India.

22. Needless to say, rice cultivation remained their primary source of income.