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People Between Ancestors and the State: The Case of the Ho and Munda People of Jharkhand, India

Barbara Verardo

Abstract

Sahlins talks about assertion of cultural distinctiveness and resistance to modernity as the surprising paradox of our time. The present paper gives ethnographic evidence of a specular case in which modernity, rather than being resisted, is used as a tool to forge cultural distinctiveness. For some forest people of Jharkhand, criteria for social status are linked to concepts of 'civilization versus wilderness'. Conversion to a sect encourages the adoption of high-caste Hindu values and codes of behavior and the public rejection of ancestral beliefs and practices. By 'liberating themselves from their shameful past', people say they 'become modern', or 'civilised'. A social forgetting of the past allows converts to change their kind and legitimise their ritual and social distinctiveness (and superiority) vis-a-vis the non converts.

According to Sahlins, people resist modernity by making it more indigenous: they assert their cultural distinctiveness while adopting the technologies and the conveniences of modernisation (Sahlins 1999:410).

Similarly, in the case of India,

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 (Dumont 1980:224; emphasis mine).

To further paraphrase Dumont, this is especially true in the case of low-caste Hindus, who tend to Sanskritise where upper-caste ones westernise instead (1980).¹

The present paper gives ethnographic evidence of a case of Sanskritisation specular to that identified by Dumont: a case in which people, by adopting codes of behaviour and values of high-caste Hindus, embrace modernity rather than resisting it. From their perspective, the overthrow of the traditional system becomes a precondition for their social status claims.

The paper deals with the Munda and Ho people of a forested village in Porahat area, Singhbhum district, in the newly founded State of Jharkhand, central India. Hos and Mundas are classified as Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution, and share common history, 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 (1985:160):

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*². *Bhagat* movements constitute a common means for Sanskritisation 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 to the Mundas³. Conversion to the *dharom* occurs through a ritual in which new converts publicly declare their commitment at liberating themselves from their shameful past and adopting a different path (*eta: ora*) than the one of their ancestors. The ritual lasts three days. Its climax consists of spirit possession sessions in which devotees liberate themselves from the spirits of their ancestors by embodying the new deity⁴.

Notwithstanding the obvious continuity in daily practices, Shiulis publicly and explicitly reject their habits and customs in their daily life. 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 crystallisation 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- -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, too⁵. 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 century⁶, whilst Mundas sympathise for the Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP), the ruling Hindu nationalist party⁷.

The BJP party is probably the largest movement of religious nationalism in the world. Its extremist fringes call for all Hindus to eradicate differences and to realise the greatness of their past in the regeneration of Hindu society. Their Hindutva ideology is based on the idea that virtually everyone who has ancestral roots in India is a Hindu and that they collectively constitute a nation. 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 hand, the State and the modern world.

A Social Forgetting of the Past

Since the very first days of my eighteen months-fieldwork in a forested village of Jharkhand, *Shiuli*⁸ converts kept on emphasising their differences vis- -vis the non-converts: could not I see how *modern* and *civilised* 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 westernised! 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 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 to the *dharom* 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 (Singh 1983:313).

Converts have abandoned the ritual offering of animals by adopting vegetarian deities. Carnivorous spirits are stripped 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 Sanskritisation. Not only rice-beer plays a fundamental role in religious practices, but in the social domain too. The preparing and the sharing of rice-beer *de facto* create 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 both caused and excused by rice-beer intoxication⁹. By rejecting its use, people not only create distinctiveness, but further crystallise the boundary between past and present.

The main break with tradition is however represented by the rejection of ancestors worship and clan graveyards. *Shiulis* have also abandoned the Calling of the Soul ceremony, which ritually connects the kitchen, adobe 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.

Shiulis 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 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. Individual tombs made of cement and placed in households gardens instead have substituted graveyards. 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 worship place 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 legitimise the present, but the present that legitimises 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 a graveyard is old, the more the presence of a clan in the territory is locally legitimised. 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 conceptualised as legal evidence of territorial belonging and land rights. People would constantly refer to their past to legitimise their present, hence our need to look at history to understand the here and now.

The nineteenth-century was characterised by tribal revolts against land dispossession caused by the colonial codification¹⁰, 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.

What people were resisting to were not only the payment of rent but also 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—7¹¹. In this way, the spiritual and ritual connection between

land and people acquired *de jure* meanings with the British.

Although the British recognised and codified indigenous customs concerning land and forest, they eventually gave priority to forest conservation and commercialisation¹². 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 two¹³. 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.

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.

In 1978 tribals eventually rose into open revolt against the Department. 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.

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 ancient and newly cleared settlements. Old graveyards identify ancient villages covered by jungle and people would resettle them. By doing so, they assert their colonising 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 conceptualised 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.

Government officials are *diku* by default. Perceived as learnt people (*etoterako*), yet ignorant (*kako adana*) about tribal places and habits, they have no legitimacy to rule. Talking about the Bihar state, one informant casually told me you can also do it [the State], everybody can do it, *knowledge* [English word] is not necessary. We know how to do it, our ancestors thought us. According to him, *knowledge* is something different from, and in many cases opposed to the words of their elders (*haram horoko kaji*).

By contrast, Shiulis are shifting their loyalty to the State. Politically, 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 something not to be proud of. They have replaced graveyards with land records as proof of land possession. Economically, the households who embraced the *dharom* were historically those of the founding fathers — hence, the wealthiest of the village. They controlled access to land and acted as mediators between the villagers and the State. As such, they had privileged access also to opportunities like education and jobs in the civil service, as teachers and forest guards. With time, their income became less dependent upon agriculture.

Today, Shiulis 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.

Shiulis conceptualise the forest and its dwellers as being at the periphery and margins of society. They 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 *Birhoko* are the most stigmatised. Shiulis would admit that one 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 they way they managed to progress vis- -vis the others, who have remained half naked, simple-minded and even fool, with poor cooking habits and uneducated.

By contrast, non-Shiulis show a different understanding of the social role played by the forest. The *Birhoko* would always appear fierce and proud of their belonging to the forest. The first time I conversed with them about the process of sedentarisation they were undergoing¹⁴, they immediately made clear to me that they are not afraid of wild animals, and described the resettlement project by shamefully saying that they are given food and are domesticated by the government. Similarly, *Buru-hoko* talk about themselves as those who *cut trees and make rice* (*daru ma: ondo: baba-chauli hobaowa*), with tree-cutting activities being perceived as an important marker of identity. Moreover, by eradicating trees, *Buru-hoko* enter in contact with the spirits of a particular area; and by worshipping them, they become spiritually connected to the land. Eventually, this spiritual connection gives them land colonising rights.

For the converts, on the contrary, the sacredness of the landscape has changed. Local spirits are neglected and kept appeased by more powerful, stranger ones. The clearing of forest and the making of new fields are not primary issues for Shiulis anymore, at

least for some of them. Shiulis 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, Shiulis, and only Shiulis, 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.

Shiulis 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, 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 Shiulis 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*.

From the Shiulis perspective, *dikus* embody modernity: they are those who read and write, those who speak Hindi, live in cities and buildings, eat white rice and not brown one (like they do); cook with oil and chillies and care for the quality of their food and not for the quantity of it. To the converts, to be modern means to adhere to values and behaviours of high-caste Hindus or to become more and more similar to the *dikus*. Ultimately, criteria for social status are linked to concepts of civilisation 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 modernity, sophistication and progress.

A Sahlins affirmed, ironic it is (once more) that anthropologists have been to so much trouble of late denying the existence of cultural boundaries just when so many people are being called upon to mark them [] Individuals may even traverse them and become other. But, just so, they then change their *kind*.

By becoming modern, people not only legitimise their *otherness* but also their ritual and social superiority. Rather than resisting modernity, they use it as a tool to forge their social and cultural distinctiveness.

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Notes

¹ Sankritisation 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. It was first introduced by Srinivas (1966). The relation between Sanskritisation and Westernisation is extremely complex. For attempts at such analysis, see Srinivas (1966: Ch. III, Ch. IV)

² The *Shiuli dharom* entered the village in the 1930 s. *Shiuli* is the name of the village where



it originated, in Gaya district, Bihar. *Dharom* means cosmic or moral order, religion, in Hindi

³ 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.

⁴ The ritual shows many interesting Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim elements. This is explained by the extremely eclectic history of the movement: originated in *Shiuli* village in Central Bihar as part of the cults surrounding Muslim saints, the vicinity of the village to Gaya led to the adoption of many Buddhist elements. Finally, the cult is today dominated by traits common to Hindu devotional and *Bhagat* movements.

⁵ 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.

⁶ The Jharkhand party represents the modern development of the Birsa Munda millennial movement, which developed in 1895 in the Singhbhum district of South Bihar, as a revolt against land and forest dispossession.

⁷ 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 November 2000.

⁸ The term *Shiulis* refer 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ In particular the Bengal Permanent Settlement of 1793.

¹¹ 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.*

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ As a consequence of government resettlement programs, Birhors are induced to abandon the forest and their nomadic habits and dwell in the outskirts of villages.