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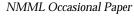## PERSPECTIVES IN INDIAN DEVELOPMENT
New Series
4

Haunting Tiger, Hugging Ancestors:
Constructions of Adivasi Personhood
in the Sundarbans

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Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2013

Haunting Tiger, Hugging Ancestors: Constructions of Adivasi Personhood in the Sundarbans[1]

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***Abstract*:** While tribal welfare constitutes an integral part of development narrative of the Indian state, colonial discourses of primitivism and aboriginality, continue to inform the non-adivasis' perceptions of the adivasis. Looking into the local narratives woven around the everyday relations between the non-adivasis and adivasis in the present day Sundarbans, the paper seeks to analyse the subtle ways in which adivasi self is constructed; stereotypes are sustained and hierarchies perpetuated. By revisiting the question of tribal identity I argue how primitivism remains an authoritative mode of constructing the 'Third World'.

***Keywords*:** primitivism, aboriginality, indentured labour, ethnic stereotype, identity.

Introduction

This paper looks at the question of tribal identity in the Sundarbans, the mangrove delta and also a heritage site for its wildlife reserve including the Bengal tiger, lying at the southern tip of West Bengal in India (nearly two third of the Sundarbans lies now in Bangladesh). However, the article will not consider the issue from the point of view of the organized protest movements aiming to secure basic rights for the tribal communities or ethnic minorities nor will it attempt to evaluate adivasi[2] progress in the fields of socio-economic, educational and nutritional rights (Mohite, 2002; Gote, 2002). Rather, the paper looks at contested notions of adivasi identity which are present in local stories and gossip and which convey ideas about adivasi personhood. The paper argues that, while tribal welfare constitutes an integral part of the development narrative of the Indian state, earlier colonial discourses

of primitivism and aboriginality continue to inform non-adivasi perceptions of the adivasis. Adivasis, better known as Sardars, are part of the social map of the Sundarbans. However, in the eyes of their non-tribal neighbours, such Bhumij and Santhal Sardars still remain 'savages', with their savagery reflected in their capacity for feats 'which "normal" human beings cannot think of'. Stories vaunting the Sardars' supernatural bodily strength abound in the Sundarbans, with the most frequently heard being how a Sardar once killed a tiger – 'Biru Sardar, an adivasi, once embraced a man-eating tiger so hard that it was suffocated to death'.

Looking at these stories and the local narratives woven around the relations between non-adivasis and adivasis in the present day Sundarbans, the paper seeks to analyse the subtle ways in which an adivasi self is constructed, stereotypes sustained and hierarchies perpetuated. The paper aims to show how the dominant representation and stereotyping of adivasis amount to objectification of adivasi selfhood and marginalization of adivasis' own life stories. At the same time, it shows that such views are both internalised and also contested by adivasis themselves.

The paper begins with the story of an adivasi Sardar embracing a man-eating tiger to death. This particular story and others that I subsequently document in the paper portray adivasis as humans with extraordinary strength and courage. The next section provides a brief outline of the conceptualisation of labour and aboriginality that came to operate in colonial labour market and situates the idea of adivasis as 'wild people' in the broader discourses of aboriginality and labour against which I seek to explore the non-adivasis' perceptions of the adivasis in the Sundarbans. The next section deals with the narrative of an adivasi *Bauley* (one who visits the forest in search of a livelihood) which contests the dominant image of the adivasis as tiger-chasers or jungle-clearers. I highlight the *Bauley's* story to show how important it is to document voices and narratives that seem marginalized by a more hegemonic representation of the adivasis as 'wild people'. I turn then to the question of the adivasis' identity as embankment builders. Here we also come across stories that on the one hand celebrate the adivasis' historic role as reclaimers of the Sundarbans or embankment

builders (thereby seeking to establish an unproblematic correspondence between aboriginality and labour power) and on the other, accuse the present day adivasis, who serve as government-appointed *Beldars*, (people entrusted to maintain embankments) of not being aboriginals any more. In other words, the adivasis as *Beldars* are perceived as having failed to reproduce the ethnic qualities of their forefathers. At the end I present *Beldars'* narratives from the present day Sundarbans to show how such overarching representation of the tribals as 'wild people' produces only a reified notion of the adivasi self. Here adivasis's own voices and narratives can be seen as expressive of their right to self representation.

Biru Sardar and the Tiger

In the Sundarbans, the land of tides and tigers, people's livelihood revolves around the forest, water and the narrow creeks. Stories of human encounters with the tiger abound. After a day's work, when people meet at local tea or grocery shops on the islands, tiger stories often figure out in their otherwise mundane conversations. The most interesting story that I heard during my year-long fieldwork on an island called Kusumpur[3] in the Sundarbans was how an adivasi Sardar once killed a tiger. I heard the story for the first time as it was told by a few villagers, who happened also to be the workers of a local NGO (Sangathan)[4] when one evening, they congregated at the tea stall next to the organisation's office. The workers were sharing tiger stories amongst themselves: stories of tigers killing people and instances when people escaped death at the fangs of the tiger. Suddenly Ratan, a worker of the Sangathan, said, 'But nothing beats the story of Biru Sardar.' 'There you are', everyone present in the stall instantaneously agreed with him. Turning to me, Prafulla, another worker of the Sangathan, said, 'You might like to hear this story, as you seemed interested in knowing about the adivasis in Sardarpara (locality where the sardars live).' Then Prafulla and the others asked Ratan to narrate the story. Ratan happened to be the first narrator but later I heard the same story from other villagers who had all heard it from their fathers and grandfathers. According to the villagers, the incident happened when Kusumpur had already become inhabited. The story goes like this:

> Once, on a warm and sultry night, Biru Sardar, an aged tribal of Sardarpara, was sleeping outside his house. Because of the mosquitoes, he had covered himself with a sheet. Biru was in deep sleep when a tiger appeared. As he was fully covered, the tiger could not make out if it was a human being, but continued towards him. Meanwhile Biru's sleep had been broken by the smell of the tiger, but he pretended to be still asleep. The tiger came near to Biru and, in an attempt to know what it was, finally had him between its four legs. Realising that he was lying under the tiger, Biru, in a state of shock, suddenly embraced the tiger, held it hard against him and shouted "tiger" "tiger". Hearing Biru screaming, his neighbours came running to his house and found him in that state. Initially they found it extremely difficult to separate the two. But when they did so eventually, the tiger was found to be dead. Biru had embraced the tiger so hard that it was suffocated to death.

After the story was narrated, one of the villagers asked me, 'Do you think a normal human being could do that?' Bankim, another worker of the organisation exclaimed, 'Such strength, my goodness! Only Sardars are capable of that.' 'Why do you think so?' I asked, to which Bankim replied 'They are the primitive people [*adim manush*] of our country. They have supernatural strength and the ability to toil in their blood.'

The Colonial Labour Market and the Discourse of Aboriginality

The story and the conversations that followed remind us of the centrality of colonial discourses of primitivism and aboriginality. In writing the history of shamanism and conquest in the Amazon basin, Taussig (1984) shows how colonialism constructed the idea of a 'wild man' and unleashed a regime of terror necessary for the spread of rubber plantation in South America.

> Putumayo rubber would be unprofitable were it not for the forced labour of local Indians, principally those called Huitotos. For the twelve years from 1900, the Putumayo

output of some 4,000 tons of rubber cost thousands of Indians their lives. Deaths from torture, disease, and possibly flight had decreased the population of the area by around 30,000 during that time (1984: 474).

Colonists in the Amazon constructed the locals as savages. They were struck by their knowledge of the forest and their ability to detect sounds and footmarks where white men perceived nothing. On the trail of an animal, they would suddenly swerve, then change again as if following the scent of their prey (1984: 487). Such 'savagery' needed to be contained and channelled in the direction desired by colonial capitalism. The result was the flourishing of rubber plantation along the upper and lower reaches of the Putumayo river in Columbia. A new equation was drawn between primitivism and civilization whereby the idea of a 'savage' was deliberately invoked and deployed to perpetuate the savagery of civilization.

However, the happenings on the Putumayo were not an isolated incident in the history of colonialism. The colonial labour market as it came to operate in India, also saw the emergence of tribals as coolies and their recruitment as indentured labourers for the expansion of colonial capitalism (Mohapatra, 1985; Breman and Daniel, 1992; Bates and Carter, 1994; Prakash, 1992; Ghosh, 1999). In this process, the rebellious hill dwellers of Chotanagpur were transformed into 'figures of docile coolies' (Ghosh, 1999: 14). Furthermore, the colonial market both produced and consumed primitivism and fetishized the correspondence between aboriginality and physical strength as a crucial element in the construction of adivasi personhood. Prakash (1992) makes an interesting observation about the perceived relation between aboriginality and cooliehood in the context of exhibitions on aborigines held in colonial India to institutionalise the pursuit of science of races. Prakash quoted George Campbell as having observed that an exhibition of the aborigines would be the easiest thing in the world because the exhibits were such excellent labourers that they might be utilised as coolies to put in order the exhibition grounds at certain times, while at others they would take their seats for the instruction of the public (1992: 158). Campbell persuaded the Asiatic Society to hold such exhibitions where members of different 'races' were assembled for presentation

as living exhibits, suitably framed in classified stalls and could be observed in motion as functioning objects (1992: 158). Mohapatra and Ghosh (1985; 1999) argue that aboriginality' became a new language for classifying Indians as labour and 'ethnic stereotypes' operated as the basis for recruiting coolies for the flourishing plantation economy in Assam and coal mines in the Chotanagpur Plateau.

A classificatory scheme arose whereby coolies considered to be 'first class' included the Chotanagpur hill people such as the Bhumij, Santhal, Uraon, Munda and Kol, while those ranked below them comprised Khettris from Bihar and other castes from Bengal, Bihar and the North-West Provinces (Ghosh, 1999: 32). It was clear from this classification system that first class coolies should be 'pure' aborigines or 'primitives' (1999: 32).[5] It was because of this construction of aborigines as 'better' coolies that the prices fetched by an aboriginal coolie were higher than those fetched by others (1999: 34). Thus, it was the perceived distinctiveness of the Santhals, Bhumijs and Mundas which allowed them an entry in the colonial labour market. Paradoxically, the market, which was supposed to erase cultural differences, actually operated through upholding a distinct ethnic stereotype (ibid).

Needless to say, it was the prospect of revenue generation that prompted colonial authorities to reclaim the Sundarbans wetlands. From the early part of the nineteenth century, the British assumed proprietary right to the Sundarbans and began leasing out tracts of the forests for undertaking the clearing operations preparatory to planting paddy (Eaton, 1987:1). The colonial power embarked upon the rapacious reclamation of the wetlands and the adivasis from Chotanagpur were deployed as coolies for clearing jungles and chasing tigers away from their habitat. It was no accident that coolies brought in as indentured labourers for the purpose of Sundarbans reclamation were also members of the Santhal and Bhumij tribes (Pargiter, 1934: 57; Mukherjee, 1981: 90). According to Choudhury and Bhowmik (1986: 330-1), like the indigo plantations in Bengal or tea plantations in Assam, the clearing of these large tracts of forest and marshy lands of the southern part of Bengal required cheap labour. Naturally, the most tempting target was the adivasi who was deemed a sturdy and hardworking person able to live at a sub-human level of existence (1986: 331).

Adivasis as Tiger-chasers, Adivasis as Savages

Thus historically, the adivasis played a significant role in the Sundarbans reclamation. And the case of the Sardar suffocating a tiger to death provides an instance of how stories circulating in the locality perpetuate adivasi Sardars' careers as forest clearers and tiger chasers. During the early stages of my fieldwork, I heard yet another story illustrative of the Sardars' predatory strength. I heard this during a rainy evening when along with many others I took shelter in a local club. It was a monsoon rain and realising that it was not going to stop soon, the villagers who were stranded there were having tea and conversing amongst them. This was the time when I came to Kusumpur and was new to the people I met at the club. Therefore, they were generally curious about my research. Their queries triggered off a discussion on the Sundarbans reclamation and its history. Eventually Sardars figured in our conversations. The villagers narrated how they heard that Sardars had cleared jungles during the day and spent their nights sitting on trees. The story they narrated was as follows:

> It was while sitting on a tree that an adivasi Sardar once dozed and fell to the ground. Before the Sardar regained his senses, he saw a tiger pouncing on him. Seeing the tiger about to grab him the Sardar caught hold of its fore legs. As a result the tiger suddenly lost control of its body and fell to the ground on its back with a heavy thud, its fore legs still firmly held by the Sardar. The tiger lay on the ground and continued to purr as if it was rendered motionless by the grip of the Sardar. The Sardar held on to the tiger for some time before he finally set it free and chased it out of his sight into the jungle.

It is something of a surprise that the villagers, who narrated the above story demonstrative of Sardar's strength and courage, also despised them as savages. The villagers present in the club that evening also discussed with disdain, predatory tastes and habits of the Sardars. According to them, until recently they were savages. Even a few years back, it was difficult to pass through Sardarpara (the locality where Sardars lived). The place used to be smelly and dirty. It was only now

that they had acquired a semblance of civility. Sensing that I might have been unconvinced by their reflections on the Sardars, the villagers drew my attention to a person sitting rather quietly in the club room, saying, "Ask Kamal to narrate his experiences at a Sardar's house in Sardarpara." Kamal was a teacher at Kusumpur high school and he, I could make out, had something to share in support of what was being discussed. I requested Kamal to share his experience and finally with the prompting of others present in the club room, he narrated his experience when he was invited to Kanak Sardar's house.

> Kanak Sardar's son was Kamal's student at Kusumpur school. As a mark of respect for his son's teacher, Kanak Sardar once invited Kamal to his house for lunch. He was given a whole *katla mach* [fresh water flat fish] to eat. Kamal was puzzled as he had no clue as to how to tackle the fish. Looking at the fish Kamal felt nauseous because it looked as though it was barely cooked and not properly de-scaled. But seeing Kanak's family members around him and the eagerness with which they wanted to feed their guest, Kamal proceeded to do justice to the food served. As he bit into the fish, blood oozed out of its head. The smell of blood made him feel sick and he could not eat any further. Kamal suffered from nausea and loss of appetite for about a month. Since then no one had ever accepted an invitation to a Sardar's house.

'We all eat fish, but can you eat fish like that? Can you think of serving fish to your guests in that manner?' Kamal shook his head rather disapprovingly. The stories narrated above construct adivasis as an exclusive category whose ways of life are not comparable to those of the non-Advasi. It was as if their strength and courage lay in their savagery; in their being wild people.

It is in the telling of such stories that ideology and ideas become emotionally powerful and enter into active social circulation and meaningful existence (Taussig, 1984: 494). As my fieldwork progressed in Kusumpur, I began to realise how the stereotypical images of the adivasi Sardars deeply penetrated and permeated the non-adivasi

world. This was also reflected in the working of the local NGO Sangthan mentioned earlier in this paper. The Sangathan, as evident from the earlier discussion, was run by the villagers. The Council for the Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), a central government agency, channelled funds through organizations like the Sangathan to provide housing for the poor, particularly those belonging to scheduled castes and tribes.

While I was in Kusumpur, I was witness to a controversy surrounding the government funded housing scheme in Sardarpara. It was during one of my routine visits to the Sangathan's office in Kusumpur that I found some of the workers engrossed in heated conversations with the coordinator of the organization. Ramen, the coordinator was found shouting at his co-workers asking them to go to Sardarpara for an inspection, while his colleagues seemed to be in a defiant mood. They in turn asked Ramen to visit Sardarpara and sort out the problem himself. They seemed to be making it clear that they were not ready to waste time in the company of the Sardars. Sameer, one of the workers present, reminded Ramen, 'You remember, last time I went to Sardarpara alone and no one accompanied me'. Then turning to me he said, 'You won't believe, the place was so dirty. There was an awful smell of night soil pervading the whole area and there were flies all over the place. The Sardars have not set up individual toilets and still defecate in the open.' Sameer went up to the window and spat out in sheer disgust. 'So what has happened in Sardarpara?' I asked Sameer. 'A problem has cropped up there and none of us are ready to go there and sort it out.' Pointing at Ramen, Sameer suggested that I should ask him about it. I did not find it proper to pose the question immediately as Ramen looked quite agitated. I left the room. A day later when I did ask Ramen about the problem in Sardarpara, he said that a widow had been allotted a house under the government's housing scheme. Recently the widow had died and since she did not have an heir, the younger generation of Sardarpara wanted to convert the house into a local club. Ramen said, 'This is illegal and we need to prevent this. I understand that these Sardars are so uncivilized that none of my boys are prepared to go to Sardarpara and talk to them about it. But at the end of the day we deal in government funds and remain answerable to the government'.

Here we are not concerned with whether the workers finally went to Sardarpara or Ramen successfully handled the problem. The workers' reluctance to visit the Sardarpara area and their adverse reactions are demosntrative of their perceptions about the adivasis. It is interesting to note that a voluntary agency that claims to represent the interests of the Sundarbans islanders and even implements programmes for the tribals does not have any member of the adivasi community within its organisational fold. Despite being an intrinsic part of the social map of the Sundarbans, in the eyes of their neighbours adivasis remain 'wild' people, 'yet to be civilized', the lack of civility reflected in their being capable of feats which 'normal' human beings cannot think of.

The Adivasi View of Themselves as Vulnerable

As one enters the adivasi world via these stories, one feels as if Sardars in the Sundarbans stand out as tiger fighters or chasers. However, my meeting with Mangal Sardar was significant in many respects. Mangal was a frequent visitor to the forest because like many other Sundarbans islanders, he "does jungle" (*jongol kore*)[6]. I remember my first meeting with Mangal at the Sajnekhali Forest Office where I had gone to meet the ranger. As I entered the office premises, I found Mangal talking to a forest guard who introduced me to him. From their conversation, I had gathered that Mangal was an occasional visitor to the forest office and today he had dropped by on his way back from Gosaba. Mangal took a *bidi* from the forest guard and the following conversation took place:

Mangal: How long do you take to issue honey collecting *passes* these days [permit for honey collection]?

Guard: I am not sure how long it will take, but to avoid delay, put in your order in advance.

Mangal (impatiently): Why don't you people hasten the process of issuing *passes*?

Guard: Who am I to hasten the process? Everything has to be in accordance with the rules.

Mangal (to me): These people are becoming unnecessarily bureaucratic, imposing stricter forest rules which make it difficult for us to survive.

Guard: If the forest office does not make rules, then you people will be in trouble; you will meet with accidents in the forest[7].

Mangal (pointing to his own stomach): When you are hungry and your hunger drives you crazy you forget all rules, you enter the forest and meet your destiny.

My second meeting with Mangal was at his house in Kusumpur when he came back from catching crabs in the forest. While Mangal was drying his fishing net in the sun and explaining how they used their curved iron rods to drag crabs out of their holes in the soil, a tiny little mud hut with an idol of *Bonbibi*[8] inside located in one corner of the courtyard suddenly caught my attention. I asked, 'Do you worship *Bonbibi* as well?' 'Why not?' Mangal looked a bit surprised. 'All of us who work in the forest worship *Ma Bonbibi*.' 'But I thought only those who feared the tiger worshipped *Bonbibi*? Your forefathers I heard were valiant tiger chasers who fought tigers and reclaimed the Sundarbans. As legitimate successors you, I thought, could do without *Bonbibi*.' Mangal smiled and answered, 'Living in this land of tides makes you respect the rules that *Bonbibi* has set for those entering the forest. The forest does not belong to any individual; all that grows in the forest ought to be shared by all living beings. Unless you learn this basic principle by heart and enter the forest with a pure heart (*pabitra mone*) and without a sense of greed, you cannot earn your living from the jungle.'

I further asked Mangal about how they protected themselves against the tiger. According to Mangal, before they entered the forest they placed their hands on the soil and chanted *mantras* to sense if the tiger was around. If their hands gently settled on the ground, they felt that it was safe to enter the forest. But if their fingers started to quiver, they left that part of the forest and moved elsewhere. I was surprised to know that Mangal was both a tiger charmer and a *Bauley* (wood-cutter who knew *mantras* to charm the tiger) who led his team into the forest. Mangal further stated that there were different *mantras* – some meant to lock the jaws of the tiger so that he cannot open his mouth, others to make the tiger change his path. He also cautioned that *mantras* to charm tigers should not be used indiscriminately; but

should be used only when danger was imminent. And it was absolutely imperative that before leaving the forest a *Bauley* should chant the same *mantras* to free the tiger and other animals from his spell so that they could again move freely in the forest. I interrupted Mangal while he was reciting a few lines from *Bonbibi's Johuranama*[9] and asked if he ever encountered a situation when his *mantras* did not work? Mangal suddenly became quiet and said that despite his knowledge of the *mantras,* he could not save his friend and colleague. I could sense heaviness in his voice as he uttered the last few words. He was hesitant to tell me how his friend was killed in the jungle but at my insistence, he finally narrated the incident which happened some years back during the honey-collecting season:

> Mangal and seven others went to the forest in search of honey. The fortnight-long expedition to the forest had nearly come to its end. They had collected honey enough for the entire group. Before they finally left the forest, Mangal, being the group leader offered puja to *Ma Bonbibi,* saying that they got enough and were satisfied with what *Ma Bonbibi* had given them. As they prepared to board the boat, Kesto Sardar, a member of the group and its *Sajuni* (one who prepares and readies the boat for the forest expedition), suddenly decided to go back to the forest in search of some more honeycombs which he had spotted on his way back. His decision to go back came as a surprise to the other members of the group because one is not supposed to re-enter the forest after one has finished offering puja to *Ma Bonbibi.* Despite their persuasions, Kesto was adamant. This posed a dilemma for Mangal: on principle, he was against re-entering the forest and at the same time he could not have left a group member behind especially when the member was his *Sajuni*. When he found that Kesto was adamant, he reluctantly followed him back into the forest. As they entered the forest and stood under a relatively big honey-comb which Kesto was preparing to break, Mangal heard something move in the bush behind them. Before he could turn around to see what it was, he found that a tiger had jumped past him, grabbed Kesto by the neck and

disappeared into the forest. The whole thing happened in a split second and when Mangal realised what had happened, he shouted to his colleagues for help. Not being able to locate which way the tiger had gone, they started to let off crackers to frighten him away from his food. They kept doing that until they managed to find Kesto's body in a pool of blood with one arm and genitals gone.

In trying to recollect the incident, Mangal looked horrified. According to him, the tiger attacked with a lightning speed, a speed that one could experience but would always be mortally scared to recollect. 'But then didn't you use your *mantras?*' I asked. Mangal smiled and answered, 'When you are driven by greed and lust, nothing seems to work. Even now I feel sad when I am reminded of Kesto's death. But then it was Kesto's greed which misled him. *Ma Bonbibi* would not protect anyone who wants more than he needs.' Mangal's smile makes his story more poignant. As a *Bauley*, Mangal has *mantras* at his fingertips, but his approach to using them reflects his deep sense of responsibility and commitment towards his profession as a 'jungle doer'. For the Sundarbans islanders like Mangal, the forest is the realm where egalitarian principles are at work making humans and non-humans respect each others' claims.

However, the most significant aspect of Mangal's narrative is that it runs contrary to the dominant representation of adivasis as jungle clearers and tiger chasers, as people of predatory strength and courage. It was as if by being a victim of the tiger that Kesto proved to be an ordinary human driven by the lure of a livelihood in the forest. Kesto Sardar's death and Mangal's predicament was the moment when the adivasis could throw the ancestral burden off their shoulders and appeared as selves freed of the shackles of colonial servitude. Thus, the haunting tiger ceases to haunt any longer, the predators (the tiger and the adivasi) stand face to face with the masks fallen off their faces.

From Embankment Builders to *Beldars*

Another arena where non-adivasis' perceptions of the adivasi assume a significant form is in embankment building and protection. The

Sundarbans are a cluster of islands which have embankments built around them. Reclamation and settlement through the clearing of forests took place before the natural process of siltation had raised the land sufficiently above the water level, so high earthen embankments were constructed to protect these settlements against daily inundation during high tides. The Bhumij and Santhal adivasis who cleared the forests and reclaimed wetlands were engaged in embankment building activities as well. After the abolition of zamindari rule in the 1950s, when protecting and maintaining the Sundarbans embankments came under the purview of the Irrigation Department, it recruited the adivasis to the post of *Beldars*, government employees responsible for protecting and maintaining embankments. The rationale behind such recruitment was not only to employ local labour to maintain embankments, but also to pursue a wider government policy of uplifting 'socially backward' communities. The adivasis, with their assumed aboriginality, physical prowess and historically defined role in the Sundarbans reclamation, qualified for the label 'indigenous people', an oft-quoted phrase in contemporary government discourses of development. Therefore, the obvious choice for these posts were the tribals (Sardars) of the Sundarbans.

Adivasi Sardars' role as embankment builders is as much an object of gossip among the villagers as is their role as forest clearers and tiger chasers. The only difference here is that the narratives that one comes across are more accusatory in nature. Soil erosion and embankment collapse spell disaster for everyone and their frequent occurrence is often attributed to laxity and negligence on the part of the *Beldars*. During my stay in Kusumpur, a considerable stretch of embankment in the southern part of the island caved in. When I reached the site I found that people from nearby settlements had already started urgent repair work. The villagers who lived close to the site were digging earth from the paddy fields in an attempt to create a new stretch of embankment behind the one that was on the verge of collapse. The stretch of embankment that had caved in already looked extremely vulnerable. A huge chunk of earth, almost 20 metres long, was leaning towards the river. Drawing my attention to it, a villager said, 'All this is due to the negligence on the part of the *Beldars*: they do not bother to visit these spots, neither do they add earth to embankments.' 'Is it the

duty of the *Beldars* to add earth to these mounds?' I asked. 'Who else?' he asked in return. The man then shouted out to a teacher of a local primary school, '*Sir* [that is how teachers are generally addressed], tell this gentleman what the *Beldars* do these days.' The man who was inspecting the breaches that appeared in the embankment said, 'What can I say about the *Beldars*, the less said the better. They have become *sarkari baboos* (government clerks) who enjoy a nice salary and do nothing to protect embankments.' 'Why do you say that?' I asked. In response to my question, the teacher responded, 'Look at their activities and compare them with what their forefathers did. Their predecessors were embankment builders. From my grandfather I heard how the Sardars worked tirelessly throughout the day and had only saline water to drink. The Sardars had extraordinary physique and enormous courage, otherwise why would they be employed for jungle clearing and embankment building?' Then the teacher asked 'Was it because of the nature of their work that they were dark complexioned?' The villager who had introduced me to the teacher intervened, to which the teacher responded, 'No, no, it is because of their dark complexion that they can toil so much. No matter how long they work in the sun, nothing will happen to them.' Turning to me the teacher said, 'My grandfather told me a story of how a Sardar once stopped water seepage through a hidden hole in the embankment. During high tide when the water level is sufficiently high, water seepage takes place though these holes. If they are not plugged in time, saline water can contaminate the soil and rice fields. I heard this story from my grandfather, so it must have happened long back':

> Once during high tide, it was discovered that water seepage was taking place through a *ghog* in the northern part of Kusumpur. It was the start of the high tide. Water was on the rise and the hole detected was found to be gradually enlarging. Realising that something needed to be done urgently, a middle-aged Sardar, called Charan or Ramu, suddenly stood with his back to the embankment wall, thinking that his body could serve as a shield to prevent the water seepage. He stood there for six or seven hours pressing himself hard against the mud wall. When water receded during low tide, saline water had eaten into his skin and left deep holes on his body.

The teacher added 'Such was the strength and commitment of the sardars but look at their successors and how they are wasting their bodily strength. They have become idle and their only interest is in their monthly salary. At the beginning of every month you will find them boozing and blowing away their money.'

Not only are the Sardars perceived as having failed as embankment builders, they are even considered to have failed in reproducing their ethnic stereotypes. Here it is interesting to observe further twists in the language of aboriginality and labour. Colonial labour market encountered problems of drinking and idling among the aborigines. The adivasis, who were the planters' favourite because of their expertise in clearing jungles and their ability to adjust to plantation life, were not considered suitable for coal mines where the need for mining coal throughout the year required the labour to be more disciplined (Mohapatra 1985:265). However, what we hear today in the Sundarbans suggests that drinking and idling, which once characterised the adivasi and served as significant ingredients in constructing their ethnic stereotype, are now seen by the non-adivasis as symptomatic of tribals losing their ethnic stereotype and becoming estranged from their 'tribal-hood'. The teacher's narrative seems to suggest that by becoming idle and alcoholic, the adivasis fail to live up to the idealised image of the tribal as a labourer with uncanny strength and courage.

The teacher's narrative provides an instance of how the villagers ventilate their grievances against the *Beldars* and how they perceive what *Beldars'* job ought to be. The teacher's view was shared by many others who were in general displeased with the *Beldars* and attributed the frequent embankment collapses or the poor condition of the embankments to their callousness.

The Adivasi Agency

Because of these accusations, I wanted to meet the *Beldars* of Sardarpara. So I made contact with them and informed them of my intention to visit them. And it was decided that they would meet me at Bimal Sardar's house at Sardarpara in Kusumpur. The day I went to Bimal's house I found that they were discussing something amongst

themselves. Seeing me, Babulal, one of the *Beldars*, asked me, 'How long do you think you are going to take?' 'That depends on the time that you think you can spare.' I answered. Babulal gave an awkward smile and said, 'Actually a problem has cropped up.' Then pointing to a young man sitting at a distance, he told me, 'His father was a *Beldar* who died recently. Since he died while in service, his son now has a legitimate claim to his father's job. But the irrigation department is creating a problem on technical grounds. We have decided to take this boy to the Gosaba office and sort it out. Therefore, you need to let us off in an hour and a half'. The boy, who was sitting with a stick in his hand and clad in two pieces of cloth[10], one to cover the lower part of his body and another piece wrapped around his bare chest, looked to me like someone whose father's formal funeral rites were not yet over. I told Babulal, 'An hour and a half is okay, but it seems that his father's death rituals are not yet over.' Babulal replied, 'That's precisely the reason why we want to take him now to the office and convince the officials about his bonafide claim.'

With the hour and a half at my disposal, I started conversing with the six *Beldars*. Except for Karna Sardar, the other five *Beldars* had all inherited their father's occupation. Initially our discussion centred on their fathers and forefathers and their deeds during the time of the reclamation of the Sundarbans. They described the odds they faced in clearing forests during the early stages of settlement. While we were chatting, Bimal Sardar kept drinking rice alcohol and nodding his head as a mark of his tacit support to what his colleagues were saying. He was drinking and at times passing his tumbler around to others for a sip. As soon as his tumbler was empty, his wife came to replenish it.

However, the moment I asked them about the allegations against them, Bimal turned grave. Suddenly he got up as if the question shook him out of his inertia and asked, 'Who told you this? Do these people know what our job and duties are?' He did not bother to wait for my response and continued, 'We are not *irrigation labourers*, meant to add earth or repair embankments. Our job is to detect hidden holes [*ghog*] in the embankment. Detecting these holes is not everybody's cup of tea, you need to have trained eyes and ears to detect such holes.' Pointing to the distant field dotted with houses and the horizon

beyond he said, 'These people [the villagers] think that anybody can become a *Beldar*.' Bimal paused a while, as he was short of breath.

Babulal went up to pacify him and made him sit on the ground. He then turned to Karna and asked him to explain things to me. Karna said that such holes are made by crabs that come from the sea during high tide. The saline water often flows through these holes and contaminates paddy fields or fresh water ponds. 'You must have seen us move around with long sticks?' Karna asked me. 'No I haven't', I answered. 'Well, we use these sticks to inspect if there are any such holes. It is only during high tide that we can inspect such holes because it is when the water rises that you can make out if seepage is taking place or not. Sometimes your eyes fail to locate them. Then you need to kneel down and use your ears to make out from the nature and sound of water flow whether holes have developed in the embankments. Holes can be detected only during high tide, but must be plugged when the water recedes.' Our discussion could not proceed further because Babulal and others wanted to go to the Irrigation office.

The next day I went to Upen Sardar's house, a few metres away from Bimal's house in Sardarpara. Upen had also been present at Bimal's house when I had met the *Beldars* there. Upen sat at Bimal's doorstep with a crutch by his side which clearly suggested that he was not physically fit. He could not sit through the entire discussion and before leaving Bimal's place he invited me to come to his house.

Upen's life was in shambles when I met him. He was slowly recovering from a stroke which had paralysed his right limbs, and as he could not work and was fearful that he would not be able to do so any more, he decided to stake his son's claim to his job. According to Upen, the irrigation office in Gosaba had set its face against Upen's claim on the ground that his son was still a minor. Initially he could not make much headway and his repeated visits to the Gosaba office did not produce the desired results but recently, he had approached a panchayat member of his village who had contacts in the Gosaba irrigation office to pursue his son's case. We had the following conversation:

Upen: Now the wind seems to be blowing in my favour. I must ensure that my son gets the job before Kanu's son, the boy you

saw at Bimal's place yesterday, gets it. But if the officers decide to recruit him first, who knows they might once again create problems in taking my son in.'

Amites: But don't you think Kanu Sardar's son should get his father's job?'

Upen: It's not that I do not support Kanu's son's claim and I can even be of help to him if need be. But all these things can happen only when I feel secure. I need to look after my own interests as well. For the last five months my salary has stopped and I do not have much land to my credit. My physical condition is such that working in the field is out of question. The villagers allege that Beldars do not work and it is because of their negligence that the embankment collapses, but did any of them bother to enquire how I am making ends meet?'

Beldars' narratives are significant in a number of ways. No matter how the identity of the *Beldars* is construed, either as descendants of their illustrious forefathers known for their legendary physique and strength or as descendants who are no longer capable of reproducing their ethnic stereotype, Sardars as *Beldars* know exactly who they are answerable to. As agents of the state, the *Beldars* see themselves as protecting its interests. Not only did Bimal make it clear that he remained answerable to the Irrigation Department but the other *Beldars* present there agreed with him. However, the way they decided that they would pursue the case of the son of their deceased colleague and establish his claim to his father's job indicated that their sense of identification with the state did not make them oblivious of their own rights and privileges. Their lack of familiarity with the detailed rules and regulations of the Irrigation Office did not prove to be a handicap. Their determination to present the deceased *Beldar's* son in person to the officials of the Irrigation Department proves that they were ready to counter any such technical problem with the strategies they had at their disposal. Similarly, Upen was on the verge of losing his job, but this sense of loss did not condemn him to a state of utter despair. Rather, it imbued him with a sense of agency that was reflected in his determination to stake his son's claim and pursue it against all odds.

With the help of ethnographic evidence, the paper argues against an established and dominant mode of theorising that views communitarian identities in the non-western context as being homogenous where factors accounting for homogeneity are internal to the collectivities themselves. In this connection I find Chatterjee's (1998) argument quite persuasive. He argues that the logic that sustains communities in non-western societies is no longer internal to such communities, which are rather shaped and reshaped by a host of institutions operating outside them. Individuals belonging to such communities are neither abstract individual selves nor manipulable objects of governmental policy, but concrete selves acting within multiple networks of collective obligations and solidarities to work out strategies of coping with, resisting or using to their advantage the vast array of technologies of power deployed by the modern state (1998:282). Chatterjee's argument has wider implications for the way the term community has been conceived especially in its application to the 'underdeveloped' or developing societies of the East. Modernization theories during their heyday considered communities of any kind as obstacles to the growth and spread of institutions and practices of modernity in developing countries. Today 'community' has been brought back onto the global agenda and currently valorised as the only way to achieving sustainable progress. Traditions which once lurked within communities to hinder social change (Agrawal, 1999: 93) are now viewed as being the only way to achieve progress. No matter how the concept of community is viewed — in negative or positive terms — it remains a reified tool in the hands of the policy makers and development practitioners. Protagonists who look upon the 'Third World' as a site for building bounded community relations fail to acknowledge that concepts such as state, society and community are in fact constituted by the specific experiences of modernisation in the non-western world. It is therefore necessary to make these experiences a part of the task of interrogating and redefining such concepts (Chatterjee, 1998: 279). Chatterjee's argument is significant in that it instructs us to look into the career of the concept in a specific context. By providing the instance of a settlement colony along the railway tracks on the outskirts of Calcutta and the settlers' negotiations with various statist and non-statist agencies at various levels, Chatterjee offers an insight into the dynamics of community formation and contests the trend towards reifying the concept (Chatterjee 2004)[11].

Summing up

The stories and accusations that came earlier in this paper provide a reified and bounded idea of an adivasi personhood. This is not to suggest that Sardars as *Beldars* are unaware of their forefathers and their role in the Sundarbans reclamation. However, what keeps the community of *Beldars* together today is not the idea that they are the descendants of adivasis who were once embankment builders and were known for their legendary physical prowess, rather the possibility of their using to their advantage the resources that go with the office of *Beldar*. Whether Bimal and Babulal pursue the case of the son of their deceased colleague collectively or Upen pursues his son's case individually, they all belong to this community of *Beldars* not simply as descendants of their forefathers, but as individuals who are deeply aware of their predicaments and entitlements as *Beldars*.

This paper thus aimed to show differing perceptions of the adivasis in the Sundarbans. The stories I highlighted depicted adivasis as jungle clearers/tiger chasers and embankment builders; as people with uncanny strength and courage. I have shown how these stories established an apparent unproblematic correspondence between aboriginality and physical strength whose genesis can be traced back to the discourse that prevailed in colonial labour market. I have shown how such colonial discourses of primitivism and aboriginality continue to inform the non-adivasis' perceptions of the adivasis in postcolonial India. But by presenting the narrative of an adivasi *bauley,* I tried to show how the hegemonic representation of the adivasis as 'wild people' produced a reified conception of the adivasi self. Yet Mangal's encounter with the forest, forest office and tiger – his predicament and helplessness – resisted any such simple construction of the adivasi personhood. By highlighting the voices and narratives of the *Beldars,* I showed how adivasis emerge as agents not restricted to the narrow confines of their depiction as embankment builders or Sundarbans protectors. In doing this I critiqued the notion of bounded community and have shown why it was conceptually untenable in the face of the divergent practices of the *Beldars*.

Notes

[1]The paper was originally presented at the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences' Conference in 2004 in Kolkata, India. I am grateful to Anjan Ghosh for his initial comments on the paper. I am also thankful to Pat Caplan for her comments on the subsequent version of the paper. It is perhaps needless to say that shortcomings are entirely mine.

[2]The terms 'tribal' and 'adivasi' in this paper are used interchangeably.

[3]The island where fieldwork was carried out is named Kusumpur.

[4]To respect the confidentiality of its members, the organisation has been given a fictitious name.

[5]This classification was found in E.N. Baker's letter to the Chief Commissioner of Chotanagpur (in *Report of the Commission on the Labour Districts Emigration Act 1880 p. 253*). I have mentioned the classification as used by Kaushik Ghosh in his essay on indentured labour in tea plantation in colonial Assam. For a detailed discussion of this issue see Kaushik Ghosh 1999, pp. 8-48.

[6]Doing jungle here refers to activities such as wood-cutting, honey-collecting etc.

[7]In the Sundarbans getting killed by a tiger is very often referred to as an 'accident'.

[8]*Bonbibi* is the goddess of the jungle in the Sundarbans. She is seen as the protector of those entering the forest with a pure heart and without any sense of greed.

[9]*Bonbibi Johuranama* (the Miracles of Bonbibi) is a narrative of Bonbibi's win over the tiger demon Dakshin Roy. The text is read out in honour of Bonbibi during Bonbibi puja. The text looks more like prose but reads like verse. The pages of the book open to the right as in Arabic and read from back to front.

[10]Two pieces of cloth refers to a ritual cloth that one dons to mourn a parent's death. The cloth is a symbol of austerity for the period between one's parent's death and the formal rites of passage of the deceased.

[11]For details see Partha Chatterjee 2004, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Permanent Black, Delhi, pp. 53-78.

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