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Adivasi Movements and the Politics of the Supernatural in Colonial Chotanagpur*

Shashank Shekhar Sinha

Spirits and witches constituted an important part of the religious and cosmological world of the adivasis. However the supernatural world did not represent a dead, insular domain. It intersected closely with changes in the socio-political milieu to acquire varied meanings and forms. The presence of different agents and forces with specific interests and locations—colonial administration, ethnographers and anthropologists, adivasi leaders, reformers and patriarchs, witch doctors, caste-Hindus, Christian missionaries, and the post-colonial 'development' regime—invested the world of spirits and witches with an intensely political character.

This article examines one aspect of this contested political space—how adivasi movements and leaders negotiated the politics of the supernatural? Beginning 1850s, it looks at all major movements in colonial Chotanagpur.[1] Underscoring the complexities, contradictions, and undercurrents, the article explores how the leaders of the various

* Revised and updated version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 20 October 2012.

[1] The districts that form the canvas of this article include Hazaribag, Ranchi, Singhbhum, Dhanbad, Palamau and Santhal Parganas. These districts were separated from Bihar to form the new state of Jharkhand in 2000. Administratively speaking, Santhal Parganas did not form a part of the colonial Chotanagpur. It is being included in most studies on the region including this one on account of geo-cultural similarity and contiguous spread of adivasi population. The adivasis of the region are mostly patriarchal and patrilineal and include tribes like Mundas, Santhals, Oraon, Ho, Khariya, Pahariya, Maler, etc.

movements used the language, imagery, and symbolism associated with the world of spirits and witches.

The Santhal *Hul*

1855–8 were tumultuous years for Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. A big revolt broke out in the Santhal areas around 1855–6 over exploitation of the tribe at the hands of moneylenders, zamindars and the police and kidnapping and ill treatment of women. The Santhal Hul is a movement which has received relatively better attention from the historians, administrators, and chroniclers and also forms one of the backdrops for Ranajit Guha's famous formulations on contours of subaltern movements and consciousness.

One of the highlights of the revolt was the 'Thakur's Perwannah' ('Heavenly Ultimatum') found in circulation on the eve of the revolt. Sidu (who led the Hul along with Kanu) testified after arrest that *Thakur*, the Supreme Being, had appeared before him and given him a piece of paper which he claimed carried a written order from the former to fight the enemies.[2] It said:

> The Mahajuns [moneylenders] have committed a great sin. The sahibs and amlah [agents] have made everything bad, in this the sahibs have sinned greatly. Those who tell things to the Magistrate and those who investigate cases for him, take 70 or 80 Rs. With great oppression in this the sahibs have sinned. On this account the Thacoor [Thakur] has ordered me saying that the country is not the sahibs.

According to Guha, this had the 'imprint of a consciousness trying to identify some of the basic elements of economic exploitation and the political superstructure that legitimized these'.[3] Further,

> The sahibs and the White soldiers will fight. Kanoo and Seedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight. Therefore you sahibs and soldiers fight with the Thacoor himself. Mother Ganges will come to Thacoor's [assistance]. Fire will rain from the Heaven... It will rain fire and all the sahibs will be killed by the hand of God in person and sahibs if you fight with muskets the Sonthal will not be hit by the bullets and the Thacoor will give your elephants and horses of his own accord to the Sonthals.[4]

Ranajit Guha identifies this as an act of 'self-alienation' which, he argues, formed as a characteristic trait of subaltern's negative consciousness. To him, the rebel Santhals envisaged the coming war on the Raj as the project of a 'will independent of themselves' and their own role in it was no more than instrumental. 'The authors did not even recognise their own voice, but heard only that of God', he writes.[5]

In the light of evidence furnished elsewhere in his book, and beyond, this argument sounds a bit too reductionist. Guha gives the insurgents agency with one hand and takes it away with another. He admits in very clear terms that the rebels had a very clear conception of friends, enemies, and targets. During the course of the movement, they attacked persons or property associated with the *sarkar* (government), *sahukar* (moneylender), or zamindar and also important symbols of power—the dak runners (post deliverers), the telegraph lines, the *thannas* (police stations) and factories. Neither in the Kol Uprising (1831) nor during the Hul, were attacks ever made on the tribal population. The Santhals made a clear distinction between the non-tribal population towards whom they were positively hostile—landlords and moneylenders—and those subaltern classes and castes that lived and worked with them in the same rural communities.[6] The *Calcutta Review* reported that *lohars* (blacksmiths), *kumhars* (potters), *telee* (oilmen), *gwala* (milkman) and the carpenters were five castes that were exempted from the Santhal depredations because these were useful to the 'Sonthal Commissariat'.[7]

[2] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, p. 28. *Parwana* normally means a notice or instruction.
[3] Ibid., p. 28.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., pp. 22–3.
[7] Ibid., p. 181.

Likewise, the rebels seemingly had a clear idea of how to move forward. Before rising in revolt, they had sent a series of petitions to the English authorities at Bhagalpur and Birbhum requesting them to address their grievances immediately. They added that their God had commanded them to wait no longer.[8] The policy of persistent appeal and petition followed by Sidu was at once a great tribute to his wisdom, to his abhorrence of the consequences to the breach of law and order.[9] Was the 'Thakur's Parwana' then meant to provide some kind of a moral/spiritual justification for the ensuing revolt? Was it aimed at giving some kind of divine/moral legitimacy? Was it aimed at mobilising popular support? The Thakur, after all,was the highest spiritual authority—greater in stature than the colonial masters and the law and order they represented. In claiming to act on the 'order of the Thakur', the Santhals were not affirming the public character of their rebellion, as Guha would suggest,[10]—rather were trying to give it one. The story of miraculous revelation, as K.K. Dutta argues, had a great power to stir the Santhals.[11] Elsewhere in the book Guha seems to suggest this tangentially. He says that the papers conveying Thakur's orders (which were found to contain among other things 'an old Book on locomotive(s) and a few visiting cards of Mr. Burn Engineer') carried by Kanu on person served as 'both an emblem of authority and as an instrument of mobilization'.[12]

Likewise, many religious rumours current on the eve of the rebellion served an important political purpose by galvanizing people into collective action. One rumour said that a *lag* (male snake) and *lagin* (female snake) had set out to devour all people. What followed was a series of propitiatory rituals by villagers which were passed on from one village to another. Guha writes that solidarity of the tribe for the coming struggle was thus built up by the relay of a ritual procedure

[8] C.E. Buckland's report cited in S.P. Sinha, *Papers Relating to Santal Hul (1855—56)*, The Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Ranchi, 1991, p. 60.
[9] Ibid., pp. 34–5.
[10] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 112.
[11] K.K. Dutta, *The Santal Insurrection*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1940, p. 14.
[12] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 248.

from one neighbourhood to another.[13] Another rumour said that a 'Subah Thakur had been born at Bhognadi [Bhagnadih]'. Hearing this, people set out for the place to discover an altar which had the Thakur seated in the middle in the guise of Sidu. Engraved by railings from all sides, the altar soon became a centre for pilgrimage and ritual worship attracting a large number of Santhals.[14] There was yet another interesting case of a *bonga* (spirit) being appropriated by Bir Singh, a regional chief (*parganait*) to give moral justification to robberies/dacoities committed. He declared in 1854 that *Chando bonga*, the principal deity of the Santhals, had appeared before him and had given him the magical charms by which he could cast a sleeping spell on the inmates of the houses he robbed.[15]

Seen in the larger context of the intersection of the supernatural and political, bonga worship during the Hul served an important purpose. Guha discusses how before the start of the rebellion, oil and vermillion sent by Sidu and Kanu were taken around from village to village to placate the bongas and ensure their support in the ensuing fight. He argues that such objects were understood to convey not only a propitiatory message addressed to the spirits but a militant message addressed to the Santhals to prepare for the resistance.[16]

One comes across several adivasi revolts where supernatural and political issues were closely intertwined, one often reinforcing the other. This could also be seen in the Munda revolt under Rudun and Kunta at Tamar in 1818. The immediate cause of the rising was attributed to a desire to lay hold of one Tribhuvan Manjhi and company accused of 'preventing rainfall through magical powers'. The insurgents were however also found to be colluding with the brother of Raghunath Singh of Sindri, the leader of the 1810 Uprising, whose family had been dispossessed of their *jagir* (service tenure) of Chaurasi.[17]

[13] Ibid., p. 178.
[14] Ibid., p. 266.
[15] Sinha, *Santal Hul*, p. 29.
[16] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 238.
[17] J.C. Jha, *The Kol Insurrection of Chotanagpur*, Thacker Spink and Co. Ltd., Calcutta, 1964, p. 53.

Guha discusses several aspects of the Hul in his effort to theorize subaltern consciousness but does not touch upon the witch killings discussed in Chotrae Deshmanjhi's account. Deshmanjhi's book incidentally forms the only Santhal account of the insurrection if we do not take into account the depositions made by those arrested. Such killings also served an extended political purpose. Aimed at cleansing the society of all evil powers, they served as instruments of collective action and, as we shall discuss, in the context of events surrounding 1857, also constituted an important cultural terrain to counter colonial domination.

Several girls and women were killed by the rebels under the pretext of witch hunting. Chotrae Deshmanjhi describes how a number of girls accused of witchcraft were shown 'the pod and pea' and slained.[18] Married women were forcefully detached from their husbands and even the husbands were threatened by the rebels. They were warned that if they did not set free their 'witch' wives, they would be killed. He testified: 'We all were afraid seeing such things. My brothers suggested that we should leave the place immediately because we too have women and girls. They might be identified as "witches".'[19]

The 1857 Rebellion

We however have greater archival evidence for witch killings during the 1857 Rebellion. 1857 in Chotanagpur was marked by both sepoy mutinies and adivasi rebellions.[20] While the 'mainstream' sepoy movement was largely suppressed after the Battle of Chatra (October

[18] W.G. Archer *Tribal Law and Justice; A Report on the Santals*, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1984, pp. 482–3; W.G. Archer, 'Santal Treatment of Witchcraft', in J. Troisi ed., *The Santals: Readings in Tribal Life, Vol. I (Religion and Magic)*, Indian Social Institute: New Delhi, 1979 [1947], p. 4.

[19] Dhirendranath Baske, 'Chotrae Deshmanjhi Reakkatha', *Bortica*, January–June, 2005, p. 13.

[20] For detailed discussion of 1857 rebellion in Chotanagpur, see Shashank S. Sinha, 'On the Margins of a National Uprising: Dynamics of 1857' in Chotanagpur', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya ed. *Rethinking 1857*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 2007, pp. 120–42.

1857), the civil/ adivasi rebellions in Palamau (Chero-Bogtah Uprising), Singhbhum (Ho revolt) and to some extent Hazaribag and Purulia (Santhal) kept alive the spirit of resistance and continued to bother the colonial government till 1868.

The 1857 rebellion in Singbhum was particularly unique on account of a marked increase in witch-killings among the Hos (often described as Kols)—an aspect completely missing in the existing historical accounts. Most reconstructions of 1857 focus on the resurfacing of the traditional rivalry between the Porahat and Saraikela royal families. One can discern two distinct phases in the rebellion in Singhbhum. The first phase (July to November 1857) is largely characterized by mobilization of Hos by the Raja of Porahat (Arjun Singh) against the Raja of Saraikela (Chakradhar Singh). The second phase (November 1857–1861) however was characterized by confrontations between the British (supported by Raja of Saraikela and Kharaswan) on the one hand, and Arjun Singh's supporters and large sections of Hos on the other.

Gautam Bhadra brings in a welcome subaltern/Ho component in his study of the event. His project of empowering the subaltern however goes a bit too far when he talks about an autonomous movement of the Kols.[21] He says, in the first phase, it was the tribal people and their chiefs who provided the main thrust of the revolt against the government. However, 'once the insurrection gained momentum, the chiefs fell behind and an initiative began to grow from below....[T] he mutiny of the Ramgarh battalion was transformed into a rebellion of the Kols'.[22] Bhadra's protagonist is Gonoo—a Kol inhabitant of Jyunteegarh and a principal adherent of Arjun Singh who led the subaltern movement in Barpir.

There was a definite discontent among the Hos of Singhbhum—the system of written oaths, annual visits by the Commissioner, insistence

[21] Ibid., p. 259.

[22] Gautam Bhadra, 'Four Rebels of Eighteen–Fifty–Seven', in Ranajit Guha ed. *Subaltern Studies IV; Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005, p. 256.

on regular payment of tax, attempts to increase the rate of assessment and to change the mode of assessment had led to the creation of a new situation in the Kol heartland. But whether this discontent transformed into a project of direct political opposition—a 'rebellion of the Kols' involving the 'entire community'—is something which needs to be analysed more judiciously.[23] Bhadra overlooks the methods adopted by Gonoo and the threat of collective violence used by his followers to enforce cooperation from vacillating elements within the community. He also underplays the fact that half of *mundas* and *mankis* (traditional village heads)—who had earlier been incorporated in the colonial administrative setup by giving them revenue and police powers—remained loyal to their colonial masters.[24]

Resistance to colonial rule among marginal societies was not always very 'direct' and 'visible'. There were surely other methods—less apparent but politically subversive—through which the Hos contested the colonial order. One therefore needs to explore other dimensions and here one may benefit from what Haynes and Prakash call a shift in focus from 'extraordinary moments of collective protest' to 'variety of non-confrontational resistances and contestory behaviour'.[25] Bhadra brings in a popular dimension to the revolt but does not carefully look into the domain of popular culture which also constituted a site of resistance. He does acknowledge elsewhere that 'all administrative regulations like the ban on witch-hunts were *systematically violated* during the upsurge' (emphasis added).[26] Could the witch killings during 1857 be examined in this context?

The conflict between adivasi and British perceptions of witchcraft and witch-hunting was reaching a critical level in the years preceding the rebellion. For the adivasis, the most common way of dealing with witches around the mid-nineteenth century was to eliminate them

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 258.
[25] Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, pp.1–2.
[26] Gautam Bhadra, 'Chotanagpur', in P.J.O. Taylor ed. *A Companion to the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, p. 84.

physically—destroy them or drive them out of the land. Wilkinson, who in the 1830s became the first Political Agent of Singhbhum, noted: 'While there was remedy for angry *bongas* and ancestor spirits who could be appeased [rather bribed] by sacrifices—first of fowls, then goats, and if these two didn't work then bullocks and buffalos—there was none for the witches who had to be *removed*' (emphasis added).[27] E.G. Man observed: 'No reasoning with them [Santhals], nor ridicule can dissuade them of their belief in witches, and of the necessity of their being *at once murdered*' (emphasis added).[28] Ball also talks about the accused and their families being 'hacked to pieces like venomous reptiles'. It was advisable to 'scotch the brood'.[29]

For the colonial administration, the solution to the problem lay in providing medical and educational facilities. 'I found a hope of destroying their belief in witch craft by establishing a hospital, ...more particularly if the medical gentlemen who may have to attend the sick will take an interest in the human undertaking'—wrote Wilkinson, the Political Agent of the Chotanagpur Agency in the 1830s.[30] Cuthbert and Wilkinson took firm steps to discourage the practice of witchcraft and *Sokhaism*.[31] Wilkinson's famous Directive (1837) necessitating comprehensive administrative interventions included specific instructions against murders related to witchcraft. By giving the mankis police powers, the colonial administration entrusted them with the task of punishing new 'crimes' such as witch-hunting.[32]

[27] *Singhbhum Old Records* (Correspondence of Commissioner's Records Room, Ranchi) compiled by P.C. Roy Chaudhury, Gazetteer's Revision Section, Revenue Department, Patna, 1958, p. 271.
[28] E.G. Man, *Sonthalia and the Sonthals*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1983 [1867], pp. 29–30.
[29] Valentine Ball, *Tribal and Peasant Life in Nineteenth Century India*, Usha Publications, Delhi, 1985 [1880], p. 115.
[30] *Witch-craft leads to murder*, Notes from the Singhbhum Old Correspondence in Commissioner's Record Room, Ranchi, in *Singhbhum Old Records* p. 271. Wilkinson's tenure also marked the direct administration of Singhbhum by the British.
[31] P.C. Roy Chaudhury, *Bihar District Gazetteers: Singhbhum*, Superintendent, Secretariat Press, Patna, 1958, p. 88 (henceforth *Singhbhum District Gazetteer*).
[32] Bhadra, 'Four Rebels', pp. 258–9.

The new entrants on the scene were a series of regulations by colonial administration outlawing witch-hunts. Hardiman says that after their conquest of India, the British sought to outlaw persecution of witches—a practice seen as barbaric. This happened not only in Chotanagpur (1853) but other regions in western and north-western India such as the Dangs (1847) and Rajputana (1853).[33] What was so unique about the new ruling? Witch killing was invested with criminality and equated with 'murder' punishable by death. In 1853, a ruling by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal equated witch killing with 'murder' punishable by death. It stated that 'no plea of savage ignorance or barbarous custom should be permitted to stay the full execution of the law upon those who are found guilty of taking human life'.[34] Announcing the ban in the state of Mahikantha (1856), the Political Agent, Major Whitelock also underlined that persons causing the death of others under the pretext of witchcraft would be 'tried for the crime of murder'.[35]

One comes across some interesting similarities in the ways adivasis in different regions reacted to the new ruling. Hardiman asserts that colonial administrators failed to acknowledge the degree to which the notion of witchcraft was socially embedded and universally believed in as a matter of common sense.[36] Skaria points out that most adivasis in the Dangs region responded to the ban with hostility and resistance.[37] They would say that 'since the Dakuns [*dakans*, witches] had received... [British] sympathy, they had become quite outrageous'. Others felt that dakans had multiplied since the British established their rule.[38] The general sympathy for witch killers led to attempts by ordinary Bhils, their chiefs, and even local Rajput power-holders to conceal

[33] Ajay Skaria, 'Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India', *Past and Present*, No.155, May 1997, p. 135.
[34] Anindita Mukhopadhyay, *Behind the Mask: The Cultural Definition of the Legal Subject in Colonial Bengal (1775—1811)*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2006, p. 47.
[35] David Hardiman, 'Knowledge of the Bhils and their Systems of Healing', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 2006, p. 218.
[36] Hardiman, 'Knowledge of the Bhils', p. 219.
[37] Skaria, 'Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence', p. 138.
[38] Ibid., p. 139.

killings from the British.[39] The result was that 'the practice was driven underground rather than suppressed....local holders of power took action against witches because they were convinced that they had a *duty to preserve their society from malign supernatural forces*' (emphasis added).[40]

Chotanagpur experienced a similar resistance. So intense and widespread was the belief that a crack had already occurred in the colonial regulatory mechanism in the years preceding 1857. H. Ricketts' (1854) report reveals that the traditional village chiefs (mankis and mundas)–who were required by new laws to report all cases of witch killings to the district administration—were found to be concealing such incidents. More often than not, they were found to be siding with those involved in killing of witches. For the Hos, the killing of a witch was no murder.[41] Ricketts noted: 'A Cole who owes another a grudge, has but to give out that he has ascertained the aggressor to be a witch to bring over to his side the mundas and mankis and when he has slain the so called witch, they will all use their utmost endeavours to shield the murder and conceal the crime'.[42]

What makes the killing political and anti-colonial? Earlier, the adivasis used to look to the village head or the king for protection against witches. Arguing in the context of Bhils of Rajasthan, Hardiman says: '[L]ocal holders of power took action against witches because they were convinced that they had a duty to preserve their society from malign supernatural forces'.[43] Skaria writes about a relevant case from Khandesh. In 1844 a suspected dakan 'seated in a basket, her eyes crammed with a paste of chillies and bound with leaves' was brought by the villagers to the British officials to be punished. They

[39] Ibid., p. 138.
[40] Hardiman, 'Knowledge of the Bhils', p. 220.
[41] L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Singhbhum, Seraikela and Kharsawan*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1910, p. 192.
[42] H. Ricketts, *Report on the District of Singboom. Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government No. 16*, Calcutta Gazette Office, Calcutta, 1854, p. 91.
[43] Hardiman, 'Knowledge of the Bhils', p. 220.

were rebuffed.[44] After the decline of the *parha* panchayats in Chotanagpur and changes in the village political superstructure, they expected the new rulers, in this case the colonial administrators, to give them protection. However the colonial administration ridiculed the adivasis and tried to destroy their belief, and later—much to their shock—invested the practice with a definite criminality.

A strong undercurrent was building up against the colonial state's negation of the existence of the witches. This counter-discourse sought to ridicule the administrators for failing to appreciate the power of the witchcraft. As the Kolean Guru says:

> The witches eat us and when we catch them and worry them just a little, the magistrates again turn the matter round and resort to imprisonment; we feel great distress; what can we possibly do, so that it might go well with us; we are utterly bewildered. Also when we explain it to magistrates they do not believe it; they say: Well then let her eat my finger, then only shall I believe she is a witch—and then they jail you. The witches do not eat using a vessel and a knife, quite so; by sorcery they send people off to the other world straight away.[45]

The breakdown of the traditional village administration under the British rule had only aided the process:

> Formerly the village headmen and his deputy were subduing them, and if they would not be peaceful, they would together with the village people, drive them away from the village after having disgraced them; but nowadays the magistrates have made them utterly audacious so that we men have become absolutely disheartened.[46]

[44] Skaria, 'Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence', p. 135.
[45] *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha: The Traditions and Institutions of the Santhals (translated with notes and additions by P.O. Bodding)*, Bahumukhi Prakashan, Delhi, 1994 [1942], p. 160. The first version of this Santal text was prepared by L.O. Skrefsrud. Completed in 1871, this work is based on Skrefsrud's interactions with an old Santhal guru Kolean and was first published in 1887.
[46] Ibid.

Some adivasis took advantage of the loosening of hold of colonial administration during the events surrounding 1856–7 in Chotanagpur to indulge in what were perhaps mass witch killings. This comes out clearly in several categories of evidence. Several British accounts of the rebellion underline this. Ball remarked that 'during the disturbed times of the mutiny in 1857–8, when law was suspended in these regions, the Kols of Singbhum and other parts of the province availed themselves of their freedom to make a clean sweep of the witches and sorcerers who had accumulated in their midst, under the *benign influence* of British authority' (emphasis added).[47] According to Dalton, the commissioner of Chotanagpur during the Mutiny: '[A] terrible raid was made against all, who for years had been suspected of dealings with the evil one, and most atrocious murders were committed. Young men were told off for the duty by the elders; neither sex nor age was spared.'[48] Lieutenant Birch remarked that the 'terrible destruction of human life which was caused by this superstition, is difficult to contemplate'.[49] O'Malley also writes that during the uprisings of 1857 the Hos made a 'clean sweep of *those* [witches] *who had remained immune under British rule*' (emphasis added).[50]

Though most killings went unreported, one could even see the turnaround in the cases registered with the police around the rebellion. The Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal wrote to the Commissioner of Chotanagpur:

> Under the first class of offence against the person there is a remarkable increase in the number of murders. The average of the previous five years was seven cases in which eighteen persons were implicated. The returns of 1859 exhibit fifty-nine cases of murder, in which 218 persons were implicated. It appears, however that fifty of these cases occurred during the disturbances of 1857 and 1858, the people availing themselves of the temporary withdrawal of our authority to

[47] Ball, *Tribal and Peasant Life*, p. 116.
[48] E.T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1973 [1872], p. 199.
[49] Ibid.
[50] O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Singhbhum*, p. 192.

indulge in their superstitious desire of exterminating witchcraft.[51]

The official evidence on witch killings is corroborated by testimonies made by the accused during the judicial trials. It is interesting to note that while most killings took place during the Uprising, they were reported and brought to trial later when the rebellion had been suppressed and the British control restored.

In the Bynteria *pir* (group of villages) of Singhbhum for example, three Kols—Mata, Sarda, and Rando—were accused of killing their fellow villager Paraee, his wife and two children. Paraee's brother Topey had hired the services of the three accused for the killing. Mata Cole testified:

> It was almost four years ago during the disturbances, Paraee Cole of our village practiced sorcery and caused the death of several villagers…He caused [my grandfather's death] and in some way caused the death of Rando's grandfather. Then Topey spoke about this to… Rando who is the Moondah [Munda] of the village, and he called us three [myself, Sarda, and Rando] and settled to kill Paraee…..They [Paraee's sons] were killed in just as were their father and mother. We then burnt all the bodies.[52]

Sarda admitted that they had taken advantage of the disorder arising from the mutiny.

> The Sahibs, we had heard, had all left the country. Chybassah [Chaibasa], Ranchee [Ranchi], and Dorundah [Doranda] had all been abandoned, and Konka Mankee told Rando the prisoner that now was the time to get rid of the wizards and

[51] Letter from Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal to The Commissioner of Chotanagpur, Vol. No. VII-Old Correspondence, Singhbhum, 1860, No. 4455 in Roy Chaudhury, *Singhbhum Old Records*, p.134.
[52] Examination of Mata; Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings, No. 58, August 6, 1859, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata (henceforth WBSA).

> witches. …We saw ourselves that there was great confusion and fighting and killing and *we [were] determined to kill our wizards and witches*. Tepoy and Rando and Mata and I conspired to kill Paraee and his family. I consider *we did a good work* because they had caused the death of others. We knew that the Sahibs hanged for such work, but we thought there would be no more hanging' (emphasis added).[53]

He affirmed that the intention was clearly to eliminate wizards and witches at a time when 'sahib's law was not functioning'. Topayee, the instigator of the hunt, confessed that he ordered the killers to murder his brother—who had been identified as a wizard six years earlier—because 'I was not the first to impute sorcery to him. Six years ago Kanoo Mankee, when dying declared that Paraee haunted him in his dreams, and that it was through his sorcery that he Kanoo, was about to die.' In a later account, he added that he sponsored the killing 'because the villagers said he was a wizard and that they would kill us both; I therefore said … I am no wizard but you can kill my brother who is one…Our father was killed for a wizard in the days before the Cutchery [court] was built'.[54]

In another case, Magoora Cole, his two little sons and sister Namsee were killed by fellow villagers Urjoon, Libro, Kolaee, Sopaee, Ghunnoo and Mata. Urjoon testified: 'I killed Magoora because he was a wizard and had caused the death of many persons in my village.'[55] Sopaee, who was a Munda confessed: 'I arranged the murder. My wife and my brother's children had been killed by Magoora. He gave meat to them and they ate it and died.' On being informed that he was convicted of the charge and would be punished for that, he added:

> It was just that we should be punished, but it is nearly three years since these murders were committed. The Bur pir was then in a disturbed state, and in all the village [not just his

[53] Ibid. Examination of Sarda.
[54] Ibid. Examination of Topayee.
[55] Examination of Urjoon; Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings, No. 59, August 5, 1859, WBSA.

own] *it was arranged that all accused of witchcraft should be murdered* (emphasis added).[56]

In a different case, involving murder of one Phillum by Beerul, the accused said: 'I refused [to kill Phillum] at first. I said that Sahib would punish me. They replied that Sahib is fighting with the Rajah.'[57]

One comes across two strong undercurrents in the testimonies of the accused. First, a strong determination to *eliminate* wizards and witches. Second, the fear of being hanged/punished by the British if caught. There was restlessness and turbulence over the inability to kill witches in public. The killers were aware of the illegality of the act and when one goes into the details of the trials, one notices that the bodies of those killed as witches were disposed or destroyed (either burnt or buried or thrown in a river) so that no evidence could be found. The killings were executed because the killers were persuaded/convinced that the province was in a 'disturbed state' and that the 'sahib's law was not functioning'. The disappearance or perceived disappearance of British rule during the rebellion is what facilitated the hunts. Witch-hunts, for many symbolised an attempt to reclaim a social space lost or restricted by the presence of colonial administration.

The Kherwar Movement

What distinguishes the movements in the post-Hul phase is the emergence of a more systematic and organized critique of bonga worship and witchcraft. We come across movements which combine elements of socio-religious reform with political and agrarian issues. Kherwar is a good example of such a trend. It is difficult to ascertain when the Kherwar (a word used for original Santhal villagers) movement actually began but it first acquired prominence under Bhagirath Manjhi. In 1865, a Santhal headman Bhagirath Manjhi claiming supernatural powers of healing attracted a large following.[58] Led by Santhal leaders

[56] Examination of Sopaee; Government of Bengal Judicial Proceedings, No. 59, August 5, 1859, WBSA.
[57] Examination of Beerul; Government of Bengal, Judicial Proceedings, No. 30, September 6, 1859, WBSA.
[58] John MacDougall, *Land or Religion?: The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858–95*, Manohar, Delhi, 1985, p. 47.

(mostly Hinduised) of Santhal Parganas, the starting point of the Kherwar movement was the realization that the bongas had failed them. It was based on certain premises—some people had been divinely chosen to show Santhals the right religion and that the latter should worship only those deities and perform only those rituals that were prescribed by the leader. It also said that those who disobeyed the leaders will incur divine punishment while those who conformed to the tenets of the new religion will prosper.[59] The oppressive and poor economic conditions of the Santhals was attributed to a 'divine punishment' accruing from abandonment of the worship of original one God and veneration of minor and evil spirits.[60] Bhagirath Manjhi and his followers claimed that the traditional Santhal spirits were not powerful enough to prevent the famine of 1874.[61]

Bhagirath Manjhi announced concrete ideas to the Kherwar movement at an assembly of Santhals at a temple at Bowsee in south Bhagalpur. According to the available reports, a sacrifice was offered; Bhagirath was anointed the king of the temple; and prayers were made for the success of the Santhal Raj.[62] Their aim was to restore the 'Golden Age' of the Santhals—when they had been undisputed owners of the land and when they worshipped one God (Thakur or Chando *bonga*) and no evil spirits.[63] Influenced by Hindu ideals, Bhagirath exhorted his followers to worship *Ram* who was identified with *Chando*. *Ram Chando*, the presiding and the only deity, was supposed to restore their lands if the Santhals purified themselves. He instructed his followers not to keep or eat fowls or pigs and drink liquor.[64] His teachings also had a political slant. He proclaimed that land belonged to the Santhals by right and that no government could demand taxes from

[59] Ibid., p. 72.
[60] Stephen Fuchs, *Messianic Movements in India*, *Asian Folklore Studies* Vol. 24, No.1, 1965, p. 29.
[61] MacDougall, *Land or Religion?*, p. 74.
[62] B.B. Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements in Colonial Eastern India, 1865–1922: Origins, Ideology, and Organization', Presidential Address, Indian History Congress, Patiala, December 2011, p. 15.
[63] Ibid.
[64] J. Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1978, p. 256.

them.[65] Bhagirath's support started dwindling when people found out that they had to repay for Burma rice which he had described as a 'gift' from the government. During the religious and political upheavals of 1874–5, the Kherwars asked the Santhals not to pay rents or cooperate with the government on the question of land settlement.

After his arrest, Bhagirath fades into oblivion. His disciples, primarily Gyan Manjhi and Dhona Manjhi, kept alive the emphasis on purification (fowl and pig killing); refusal to pay the so-called famine advances; and denial of rent obligations.[66] The Kherwar movement was kept alive by several small leaders called *Babajis* who claimed to have received a mandate from Ram Chando to work for the economic uplift of the tribe. Skrefsrud says that the Kherwars also included *Sing Bahini* (Hindu goddess *Durga* who uses lion as her vehicle)—the goddess of the landlords—in their list because they felt that by 'offering her more fervent devotion in a just cause than the lukewarm attention of untrustworthy and usurping Bengalis' they could win her over to their cause. Bhagirath's followers also used to smear their foreheads like the Hindus and some were also reported to have donned the sacred thread. In 1865, 1874–5, and 1880–1, scraps of paper were also passed around as parwanas (notice, instructions) concerning religious and agrarian issues.[67]

The movement acquired greater prominence under Dubia Gosain or Gosain Babajee. His leadership is also identified as the anti-census phase of Kherwar movement. He was believed to possess miraculous powers to bring about anything he desired. Dubia asked the Santhals to oppose the 1881 census. His followers took a pledge not to reveal their names to enumerators, which they argued had already been recorded in Gosainji's book and the state had no right to record them again. The movement also assumed violent forms and sometimes the Kherwars assembled with arms to scare away enumerators and people and some offices and bungalows of colonial officials were also set on fire.[68] The colonial administration took immediate action and suppressed

[65] Fuchs, *Messianic Movements*, p. 29.
[66] Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements...', pp. 17–18.
[67] MacDougall, *Land or Religion?*, pp. 77–8.
[68] Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements.', pp. 19–20.

the movement. A duping incident in 1881 also affected the reputation of the Kherwars. A Kherwar leader claimed that he had communications with the spirits of Sidu and Kanu, leaders of the Hul. He announced that, on a given day, he would offer himself in a sacrifice by entering the Kundli tank (pond). On the given date, people flocked to the place carrying presents of money and cloth. The leader entered the water with a sheep in his arm and, after staying for some time under water, disappeared.[69]

After Dubia Gosain, the Kherwar movement went underground and got divided into three sects—*Sapha Hor* or *Sapai, Samra,* and *Babajiu* or *Babaji*. Even after the division, most continued to observe some common traditions including the worship of Ram Chando, who took over some of the attributes of the former bonga. Whenever the Sapha Hors became ill or their cattle were attacked, they would call on Ram Chando to save them from calamities.[70] One of the necessary preconditions for entering the Samra sect was the total abandonment of the belief in bongas. Upon final initiation of any person, the leader of the sect would invoke Ram Chando saying: 'Now thou seest, this man also has seen your reliability and is from today free from entering us. Help him and rescue from all diseases and sickness'.[71] The Samras would sing songs to drive away witches and *bhuts* (ghosts) and one of their rituals involved drawing pictures of witches and spitting and trampling on them.[72]

The Sardar Movement and Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan*

Unlike the Kherwar movement, socio-religious revitalisation did not form a part of the programme of the Sardar movement or *Mulkui Larai* (the flight for land), popular among the Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi. Led mostly by Christian converts, it focussed more on agrarian issues and the inalienable right of adivasis to land. Like the leaders of

[69] Ibid., p. 85.
[70] P.O. Bodding, 'The Kharwar Movement among the Santhals', *Man in India*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1921, p. 225.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., pp. 226–7.

the Tamar (1810) and Kol Uprising (1831), they claimed to be the descendants of the original settlers. Inspired by the ideal of a past 'Golden Age', free from *diku* (alien, outsiders and exploiters) presence, the movement had a strong anti-diku component. They also organized collections of money to engage lawyers from Calcutta to prepare petitions to the Raj or to fight legal battles for the restoration of lost land. As a settlement officer of Ranchi observed in May 1903:

> To one who has not been among them it is difficult to realise the passionate attachment of these savages to the grove and graveyard of their clan and to the fields which their ancestors cleared among the forests, and equally difficult to realise how sensitive they are to the degradation from the honourable rank of Khuntkattidar to that of mere raiyat.[73]

Failure to get their lands restored both with the help of Christian missionaries or Calcutta lawyers, the movement assumed a more radical trend. From 1890 onwards, the focus turned against all Europeans including missionaries and officials suspected of colluding with the zamindars. A group of neo-Sardars emerged who believed that their salvation lay in the end of the British rule that protected their enemies.[74] Birsa Munda's movement, the Ulgulan (Great Tumult) was influenced by this trend. One of the best-known example of tribal uprisings, it affected a vast area south of Ranchi. The Mundas had seen their traditional *khuntkatti* land system being eroded by jagirdars and *thikadars* (contractors) coming from outside. The associated problems of recruitment of indentured labour, *beth begari* (forced labour), and proselytization by Christian missionaries also contributed to the building of the revolutionary situation.[75]

It is important to retell some episodes and incidents from Birsa's early life which played an important role in the making of 'Birsa, the

[73] S.C. Roy, *The Mundas and their Country*, Catholic Press, Ranchi, 1995 [1912], p. 179.
[74] K.S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and his Movement: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur*, Seagull, Calcutta, 2002 [1983], pp. 23–7.
[75] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, MacMillan, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 46–8.

Prophet'. They chart his interesting trajectory of receiving a divine sanction from the *Singa bonga* (Supreme Being) to ameliorate the conditions of his fellow tribesmen to becoming the Supreme God himself.

Once while chopping a piece of wood, Birsa sustained an injury in his leg. He went to a *bhagat* (witch doctor) who ascribed it to the work of some spirit and advised him to offer a sacrifice. Birsa offered the sacrifice and apparently recovered. His experience of religion was born out of this incident.[76] In May–June 1895, the Supreme God of the Mundas is said to have 'entered his heart'. There are some popular accounts of his encounter with the supernatural. One day Birsa dreamt of a grey-haired man sitting on a chair with a spear in his hand. The man planted a *mahua* tree on a fallow land and, after smearing it with oil and butter (to make it smooth and slippery), left a valuable object on top. He then asked the four persons present—a bonga, a *raja*, a judge, and Birsa himself—to climb on the tree top and bring down the valuable object. The bonga, judge, and raja tried to fetch the object but failed; Birsa however was successful. This dream is interpreted as a subconscious projection of his inner conflicts—his confrontation with three principal enemies of the tribe: judge, representing the authorities; raja, the zamindars; and bonga, the old religion. The old man was none other than the Singa bonga and Birsa projected this dream as a divine sanction of his mission and much of his religious and political programme.[77]

Another account tells the story of Birsa's encounter with the supernatural while on a visit to a jungle with a friend. It happened during the days of early monsoon. There was a thunderstorm, lightning struck him, and his face momentarily changed from ordinary brown-black to glowing red and white. On being asked by the friend, he 'promptly declared that he was just having a revelation from the Deity and that more miracles were forthcoming'.[78] On returning home, Birsa's companion quickly spread the news of his 'marvellous interview with

[76] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 46.
[77] Ibid., p. 47.
[78] Roy, *The Mundas*, p. 204.

the "Deity" with such additional details as his dazed imagination could suggest'.[79]

The word spread in the village and Birsa was soon visited by a Munda mother with an ailing baby. He touched the baby, breathed over it, chanted some *mantras* (incantations) in an unintelligible jargon, and confidently declared the baby cured.[80] The tales of Birsa's miraculous powers thus began to spread. After the incident, he would shut himself in his house and talk strangely. Soon it became known that God had entrusted him with all powers in the world and that he would cure the sick. Birsa, the healer was born. He went to Katui village, where an epidemic had broken out, and ordered the diseases to leave the village by the main lane. He asked all the diseased to fall in a line and cured them through some mantras. This episode was repeated in another village.[81] There may have been some difference between his method of driving away the diseases and those of the *ojhas* but it is interesting to see him assuming the role of the traditional healers or witch doctors. His reliance on mantras brought him very close to the traditional ojhas. Soon he also cured a 'half-crazy, garrulous old woman, whose sharp tongue was the plague of the village'. Hoffman writes: '[R]umours of miraculous care were diligently spread. I have myself met people coming from enormous distances carrying sick and dying people to Chalkhad, and I have met them carrying dead bodies back to the villages'.[82] Reacting to allegations of people who had received his ministrations but were not cured, Birsa said those who had no faith in the 'Messenger of God' could not be cured.[83]

S.C. Roy says that Birsa before long perceived that his hold on people's mind would require a more stable basis than a shaky reputation for miracles. For a few days he sat silent and solemn, shutting himself in his house for some time. Out came the message he had 'received

[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 47.
[82] J. Reid, *Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Ranchi, 1902—10*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1912, p. 42.
[83] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 49.

from the Singa bonga Himself' for the salvation of the tribe.[84] People flocked in thousands to Chalkhad to listen to 'Birsa, the Preacher'. He claimed he was a messenger from God with the mission of radically transforming the world. He predicted an imminent deluge which would sweep away government and all the institutions of the old political system; only a small colony of his Munda followers would survive. He asked his followers to come to Chalkhad with their traditional arms and weapons.[85]

Soon the movement started acquiring an agrarian and political character. The Sardars played an important part in this shift and radicalisation. 'I got certain news too that the religious colouring of Chalkhad was fading more and more, and that the real political aims were coming out as Chalkhad was getting more and more crowded with armed men,' wrote Hoffman.[86] Seeing that Birsa's pretensions were exceeding the bounds of 'permissible nonsense', the colonial administration sent police constables to arrest him. Incited by Birsa (who proclaimed that his Raj had come) his followers confronted the constables and threw their bedsteads and other belongings in a river. Luchman Lal deposed:

> In throwing the *khatias* [cots] in the river the crowds exclaimed: The *Sarkar Raj* is at an end and their servants are dead, hence we throw their beds into the river. They were beating the toms and the fans not only as insinuating signs but also as a very inauspicious thing...Birsa was preaching to the people not to attend to the *bhooth* [bhut or ghost] make sacrifice.[87]

Ranajit Guha says that far from being treated as august representatives of the sarkar, the constables were treated as bhuts—dead souls fit only to be exorcised by the whiff of winnowing fans and noise of drums.[88] Birsa was arrested in August 1895 with the help of

[84] Roy, *The Mundas*, p. 205.
[85] Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements...', pp. 46–7.
[86] Reid, *Survey and Settlement Operations in Ranchi*, p. 46.
[87] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 67.
[88] Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 57.

a large police force headed by the District Superintendent of Police, G.R.K. Meares. In the fear of impending retaliation, people sought shelter from the wrath of the government by converting to Christianity. G.H. Lusty makes an interesting observation: 'The government had for the time being assumed all the terrors of the *bhut*, and the best way to propitiate it was to accept the government's religion'.[89]

After his release from jail in November 1897, Birsa and the Sardars made preparations for a violent and armed resistance against the colonial rule. Though miracles and healing did not form a part of this militant phase of the movement, reliance on the supernatural continued. B.B. Chaudhuri says that religious reform did not form a part of the 'first movement' (earlier phase) as K. S. Singh believes but were only effected in the 'second movement' (later phase).[90] It seems likely that Birsa's earlier ideas of religious and social reform gave way to a strict moral and social code in the later phase of the movement. Worship of one God by offering regular prayers; abandonment of the belief in bongas, witches and attendant sacrifices; abstention from eating any animal food; purity of character and cleanliness in personal habits; wearing of *janeu* or sacred thread; no work on Thursdays (the day of his birth); and no cutting of *Sal* trees on Tuesdays became the doctrines of his new religious order—'Birsa Dharam'.[91] It is interesting to see how the 'Messenger of God' began to be identified with God himself—the Singa bonga. People approached him as their Singa bonga who looked after them. Gradually the 'Father of the Earth', the *Dharti Aba* took the place of the Singa bonga who faded into oblivion. The old pantheon was demolished and *Eang Abaking*, mother-father, and *Gomke*, the lord placed at the apex of the new.

Birsa was also looked upon as incarnation of *Khasra Kora*—incarnation of Singa bonga in which he destroyed the *Asurs*.[92] Conflict and animosity between Asurs and Mundas was an integral part of Munda folklore (*Asur kahani*) and also accounted for Birsa's tirade

[89] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 78.
[90] Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements...', p. 47.
[91] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, pp. 205–6, 299.
[92] Ibid., pp. 52, 178.

against the bongas, witches, and witch doctors and drinking of *hanria* (rice beer). The Asurs, the iron smelting community, were traditionally credited with being the progenitors of spirits by both Mundas and Oraons. The Asur legend (*Soso bonga*) sought to justify the worship of spirits under the nominal overlordship of Singa bonga through sacrifices offered by *pahan*, the religious head.[93] Hoffman says that Mundas found the Asur influence reprehensible because it led to the most hideous features in their social life—dread of witches and spirits and the consequent practice of magic and witchcraft.[94] The vehemence of Birsa'a attack on Asur spirits is echoed in the prayers and songs related to the new order. The spirits were to be defied and denounced.

O Spirits of hills, deep water,
You shall not get any [sacrifice] from us
You have not created earth and heaven,
Therefore O spirits keep away.
O Father and Mother, with your mercy and help alone,
With medicines alone,
We shall be cured.[95]

Another example:

Father and Mother have created heaven and earth;
They are sole refuge and shelter
The spirits will not be propitiated at any cost:
O the creator, Father and Mother of Earth and Heaven,
We pray heart and soul.
We entrust our Life, body, and soul to both of you.
O Father and Mother, you alone can save us
We also entrust all devils and enemies to you
Now they shall not get anything [sacrifice]
In our homes and dwelling places,
Even if they fall from heaven.[96]

[93] Ibid., p. 9.
[94] Revs John Hoffman, Arthur Van Emelen and other Jesuit Missionaries, *Encyclopedia Mundarica, Vol 1*, Gian Publishing House, Delhi, 1990 [1950], p. 250.
[95] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 179.
[96] Ibid., Appendix H (Millenial Poetry), p. 320.

Cultural revitalisation formed a vital aspect of the later phase of the movement. It had two parts: religious revitalisation, discussed above, and an awareness of their glorious past. Birsa tried to create a new consciousness of the past and Munda cultural traditions. He asked his followers to visit two temples which he claimed once formed places of Munda worship. Sacred Tulsi (basil) leaves from Chutia temple and sandal paste from Jagannath temple had the magical potential to make the bodies of the Mundas invulnerable to the superior British military force. So had 'holy water' (*Bird Da*) obtained from a particular place Naw Rattan.[97] B.B. Chaudhuri argues that what Birsa was trying to revive in the name of old Munda cultural traditions were actually invented.[98]

Soon the rebels attacked churches and police stations in Ranchi and Singhbhum. It was announced that there will be a shower of fire and water in December, and those who did not wear the sacred thread or embrace Birsa's religion—*sansars* (non-Christian tribals), *sadans* (Hindu artisanal castes), *rajas* (zamindars), *hakims* (officers or magistrates), and Christians—would be killed. The Raj belonged to Birsa and the guns and bullets of enemies would turn to water and the Birsaities would become invisible to the enemy eye.[99] An Ulgulan song identifies the three principal enemies of the Mundas—witches, Europeans, and other castes:

> Oh kill the witch, such the poison,
> O kill, kill
> O Father, kill the Europeans, the other castes
> O kill, kill.[100]

The Mundas were defeated in the Battle of Sail Rakab (January 1900) and Birsa was arrested. He later died in the jail. His followers came to be divided into the Sunday and Thursday School. Birsa's legacy continues to be debated and a few Birsaites of the Thursday

[97] Chaudhuri, 'Radical Adivasi Movements...', pp. 52–4.
[98] Ibid., p. 54.
[99] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 100.
[100] Ibid., p. 101.

school still regard him as a *deonra* (witch doctor) and continue to impart instructions in *rum* (clues to trance) and mantras which they claimed to have received from Birsa.[101] There is a close similarity in the methods of Birsaites of the Thursday School and the Tana Bhagat movement which affected Chotanagpur between 1914–25.

Tana Bhagat Movement

The originators and followers of the Tana Bhagat movement aimed to restore the 'Kurukh Dharam' or the real/original religion of the *Kurukhs* or Oraons. It reflected a strong desire of freedom from the bondage of capricious spirits and oppressive and inequitable land systems and laws. Their campaign against the old religion and spirits had three components. First, it began with a suspicion that the spirits, to whom they looked for help, appeared completely powerless to take them out of their economic distress and oppressive agrarian situation. Second, the realization that such spirits were, in fact, largely responsible for their miserable social and economic condition. Third, spirits were to be systematically abandoned and also expelled from the Oraon country. The belief in such spirits, they declared, was not a part of the original Oraon faith but an importation from the Munda system. *Niiti Dharmi alarghi nadehu mala, Baba, bhutehu mala*: 'For the followers of good and true [Tana] religion, there are no spirits or bhuts' was the slogan which became the cardinal principle of the movement.[102] *Erapanta, ballinta, manal nadan, tana Baba tana* is what they prayed: 'All the spirits of the house and of the door that so long we sought to appease—do pull them all [down].'[103] The bonga world was redefined to suit the Tana faith. This was done by empowering the *Dharmes* (Supreme deity of the Oraons), otherwise considered supreme but powerless, and by completely doing away with the distinction 'benevolent' and 'malevolent' spirits. All spirits came to be regarded as 'evil'. Such 'evil' powers had to be ousted from the Tana world and Oraon land through chants and mantras initially addressed

[101] Ibid., p. 180.
[102] Rekha O. Dhan, 'The Problems of the Tana Bhagats', *Bulletin of the Bihar Tribal Research Institute*, Vol. 2, No.1, July 1960, p. 159.
[103] Ibid.

to Dharmes and later to many Hindu gods and goddesses accommodated in the religious order of the Tanas.

In April 1914 one Jatra Oraon (a resident of Gumla subdivision under Ranchi district) gave the first systematic formulation to the movement. He proclaimed that Dharmes appeared to him in a dream and 'asked' him to give up *matiao* (ghost finding exorcism) and belief in bhuts or spirits and to purify and reform their lives so that they could be treated as equal to Christians and Hindus in social status. He instructed the Oraons to abjure all animal sacrifice, animal food, and liquor; give up ploughing their fields which entailed cruelty to cows and oxen but failed to protect the tribe from poverty and famine; and, shun work as coolies or labourers under men of other castes or tribes.[104] He further declared that he had been ordered by Dharmes to spread the faith, teach his disciples mantras or songs (which came to him through divine inspiration) and thereby cure fever, sore eyes, and other diseases. On account of his refusal to allow his followers to take up work as coolies, he was arrested. Thereafter little is known of him. A succession of leaders tried to give direction to the movement. Among them was Litho Oraon who declared herself a Goddess and preached along the same lines as Jatra. Her teachings spread like a 'wild fire' in Ranchi, Hazaribag, and Chandwa (Palamau). Some Kharias and Mundas also joined the movement but it remained predominantly Oraon in composition. The colonial administration charged Litho with being a 'lunatic', but gave her a chance to stand a trial. On her release however she faded into oblivion.[105] Towards the end of 1915, Mangor Oraon proclaimed himself as the leader of the Oraons but failed to make an impact. Between 1915 and 1919, when Sibu and Maya Oraon emerged on scene, the movement began to be characterised by formulation of new rules of conduct, regulations, doctrines, and beliefs but also extensive witch hunting campaigns.

[104] S.C. Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Gyan Publishing House, Delhi, 1985 [1928], pp. 341–42; K.S. Singh, 'Tribal Peasantry, Millenarianism, Anarchism and Nationalism: A Case Study of Tana Bhagats in Chotanagpur', *Social Scientist* 186, Vol. 16, No. 11, November, 1988, New Delhi, p. 37.
[105] Ibid., p. 38.

All followers of the new faith were required to give up intoxicants and animal food, as well as their habit of dancing at the *akhras* (communal dancing ground), holding *jatras*, or engaging in hunting expeditions. There was a rejection of *matis* and ojhas (both witch doctors) since the Oraons associated the lowest category of bhuts with *dain* (witch), *bishahis* (sorcerer/sorceress), and matis which were vociferously discarded.[106]

> All the ghosts and spirits, O Brethren,
> shall be utterly destroyed,—destroyed
> All the witches and wizards
> shall be utterly destroyed.
> The Churil Sprits, O Brethren,
> shall be utterly destroyed,—destroyed[107]

They also stopped the practice of offering sacrifices to spirits during festivals, jatras, and ritual celebrations—all of which required the mediation of the religious head whether pahan or *pujar* or *mahto*.[108]

> O Tana Father,
> drive out the sheep-eating,
> pig-eating, goat-eating, fowl eating, and
> life destroying ghosts of our ancestors, —drive them, aye, drive them out.[109]

The colour red was abhorred because it was the colour of blood and the Tanas used this pretext to prevent their children from getting vaccinated. Bedecking bodies with jewellery or tattoo marks or wearing clothes with coloured borders was generally interdicted. Lying and theft were forbidden and ceremonial cleanliness was emphasized upon. Earthenware, cooking pots, and drinking vessels were thrown away as 'polluted' when touched by pigs, fowls or dogs. Thursday was considered the day of the Sabbath by the Tanas. It is important to note that Thursday, regarded by Hindus as the day of *Lakshmi* (Goddess

[106] Ibid., p. 28.
[107] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, p. 385.
[108] Singh, 'Tribal Peasantry...', p. 29.
[109] Ibid., p. 387.

of Wealth), was adopted by the Tanas as the day when all cattle (which formed the *Lakshmi* of the agriculturists) were to be rested. This phase of the movement also saw the incorporation of many Hindu deities such as *Indra*, *Ganesh*, *Mahadeo* including those from the *Ramayana* tradition—*Sita*, *Lachman*, *Bharat*, and *Shatrughan*.[110]

A more prominent component however was the spirit-driving campaign which lasted for two to three days. Such drives would start in the evenings at the boundary line of the village from where the bhuts had to be expelled. The Tanas would assemble and sing songs and hymns to 'seek out the spot' from which the bhuts had to be driven out. This would continue till one of them showed signs of spirit possession and ran to a 'spot'. The whole company would then arrange themselves in a circle and proceed towards the spot leaving an opening on the north. And then with their hands folded they would go on singing till cock-crow:

> Pull Father, Pull, Pull down the bhuts,
> Pull Father, Pull, Pull the bhuts in corners and turnings
> Pull, Father, Pull,—Pull—Pull—Pull,
> Pull the bhuts that live in hiding
> Pull Father, Pull, Pull the bhuts of ditches and mounds
> Pull, Father, Pull,—Pull—Pull—Pull,
> Pull Father, Pull, Pull the bhuts of persons slain
> Pull, Father, Pull,—Pull—Pull—Pull,
> Pull Father, Pull, Pull the bhuts of the witches
> Pull, Father, Pull,—Pull—Pull—Pull,
> ... Pull the bhuts that are by witches egged on
> ... Pull the bhuts to whom vows were by our fathers made
> ... Pull the bhuts to whom vows were by our grandfathers and great grandfathers made
> ... Pull the bhuts that on fowls do feed [as sacrifices]
> ... Pull the bhuts that on sheep do feed [as sacrifices]
> ... Pull the bhuts which men (human sacrifices) do eat.[111]

[110] Ibid., pp. 394–5; 379–85. Also see Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Reordering a World: The Tana Bhagat Movement, 1914–1919', *Studies in History* Vol. 15, No. 1, n.s. 1999, pp. 28–9.
[111] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, pp. 349–50.

Gradually the devil-driving operations would move inwards towards the *basti* (hamlet), then to huts and further inside. In this way, in two to three days, all bhuts would be purged out of the village. After this the Tanas would take a purificatory bath. The same incantations would be employed to expel the familiar spirit of a supposed witch and thus rid her of evil influence.[112] The expulsion of spirits did not however make them full proof against the diseases and, in such attacks, the disease-spirit had to be expelled by the old method of exorcising (though it was less ritualistic) from one part of the body to another, head downwards, till it finally reached the toe and driven thence into the ground and finally passed into the rivers.

> The pain, like a wind, from heaven it came,
> From the heavens, we have blown it down,
> Blown down from the heavens
> On the scalp-lock it came,
> Driven down from the scalp lock
> Into the head it went;
> Into the ears it entered;
> Driven down from the ears
> Into the eyes it went;...
> & c., & c.,[113]

The extensive spirit-driving campaigns (which happened at night) caused great panic among the local zamindars and police officers who could neither understand the vociferous songs and incantations nor were allowed to witness the proceedings. Such nocturnal secret gatherings were therefore banned by the local authorities. Some cases of violence against the witches were also reported.[114] The Tanas used witch accusations to convert people to their faith. In 1915, Ranchi district recorded no less than twelve cases of murder of persons suspected of practising witchcraft. It was reported that 'the Bhagats coerced the non-Bhagats by declaring their women to be witches'; 'in Chainpur, they have declared one woman in each non-Bhagat house to be a dain or dain bisahi'. Many of the denunciations of women as

[112] Ibid., pp. 350–52. Roy describes such campaigns in great details.
[113] Ibid., pp. 368–9.
[114] Ibid., p. 345.

witches occurred in the course of spirit-driving operations.[115] Those who did not comply with the regulations of the Tana faith were forbidden the use of public wells and their wives were declared witches and their fowls and pigs killed.[116]

Though ghost-hunting campaigns formed an important component in the early stages, some Tanas also stopped payment of rents to landlords and gave up ploughing their land.[117] The movement had not become explicitly anti-British but elements of subversion could be seen in the construction of the *German Baba* or *Kaiser Baba* as some kind of a 'saviour'. The Germans had then acquired some victories against the British and it was believed that Germans would march to India after defeating them. Slogans like *Pancham ki Kshai German Baba ki Jai*[118] (*Pancham* presumably referring to George V) rent the air. Soon the *German Baba* was incorporated as a protective deity in the Tana religious order and many songs and prayers were addressed to him. Along with other deities, he was also invoked to destroy all 'evil' powers which in early 1920s also included the British.

> O Father Tana, pull out the enemies on the border,
> Pull out the witches and the spirits,
> Pull out the British Government.[119]

What has gone unnoticed is the political undercurrent in some of their songs. They were invoked against extended 'evil' powers such as the steam engine, bicycle, and train—objects symbolizing the presence, and perhaps also the might of the colonial masters.

> Pull Father
> Pull the steam-boat,
> Pull, Father, Pull,
> Pull the railway train

[115] Dasgupta, 'Reordering a World', pp. 28, 34.
[116] Ibid., p. 34.
[117] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, p. 344.
[118] Dasgupta, 'Reordering a World', p. 5
[119] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 212.

> Pull, Father, Pull,
> Pull the bicycle
> Pull, Father, Pull.[120]

By 1919 however the Tana Bhagat movement assumed a radical trend with the emergence of Sibu and Maya Oraon. Twenty-year old Sibu declared himself to be the leader (some documents also describe him as *Bhagawan*, the God). He showed people leaflets written in broken Hindi and informed the police that things would improve after the festival of *Holi*. The Tanas declined to pay rent to zamindars, *chaukidari* tax, and did not allow their children to be vaccinated as they were forbidden by religion to see the colour red (the colour of the blood). It is interesting to note that Sibu had joined the Tana Bhagat movement when it first broke out in 1915 but reverted to the old religion following an outbreak of cholera in 1916.[121]

One of the extracts from the leaflets in circulation said:

> It is no longer the Raj of the zamindars. The earth belongs to the pious men. Nobody should give any rent or chowkidari tax.
>
> The banias (traders) must not attend bazaars. They rob the men. Marwaris sell cloth at high rate and cheat religious men. Marwaris, may your cloth be burnt to ashes; Musalmans, may you perish. The vagabonds and their prostitutes will perish as soon as Phalgun comes (referring to Holi festival).
>
> Brahmans, Rajputs, Rajas, and Zamindars had nothing to eat when they came here but now they have become so powerful as to beat the Oraons and Mundas.
>
> Christians are the lowest class. God says so.[122]

[120] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, p. 350.
[121] Inspector of Police to Deputy Commissioner, Ranchi; Government of Bihar and Orissa; Political Department Special Branch, File no. 86/1919, Bihar State Archives, Patna (henceforth BSA).
[122] Extract from the Diary of Superintendent of Police for the week ending 20-12-1919, BSA.

In the autumn of 1919, a section of Tanas led by Sibu Bhagat let loose their cattle and left for Sat Pahari Hills in Hazaribag where they expected the advent of a 'saviour' or deity who would bring back the good old days of the Oraons. Nothing happened at Hazaribag. Sibu then declared that Dharmes desired that they no longer observe restrictions in food, drink, and conduct and that they were free to enjoy *sorho singar batisho ahar*—all sixteen kinds of carnal pleasure and all the thirty-two kinds of food. He is reported to have said that by imitating the Europeans—who took all kinds of flesh and liquor yet were free and powerful—they too would acquire power and wealth.

Despite their comprehensive anti-spirit programme, it is important to note that the Tanas also picked up elements from old religion to mobilize support. In their anti-zamindar programme, ancestor graves were chosen as symbols of mobilization. An extract from the diary of the Superintendent of Police, Ranchi for the week ending 27-12-1919 notes:

> There is a grave near the encampment at Tiko and the Bhagats pour water on this daily, alleging that it is the grave of an Oraon who was killed in a massacre of Oraons by zamindars hundred years ago and they are now reviving the spirits of their forefathers.[123]

By early 1921, the Tana Bhagats had come under the influence of Non-Cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and this was strengthened by Gandhi's visit to Ranchi. Gandhi's *Swaraj*, it was spread, would usher is a tribal millennium. Seen as an incarnate of Birsa Bhagwan or sometimes Jatra Oraon, Mahatma Gandhi was also invested with supernatural powers—a person who could walk through fire and water unharmed. He was supposed to establish a 'Dharma Raj'(Rule of Righteousness) after driving out the British and dikus. Christian tribals, it was held, had already got their Swaraj because they no longer rendered any service to the landlord. The Swaraj for non-Christian tribals was not far off. By 1922 a large section of the

[123] Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department Special Branch, File no. 86/1919, BSA.

Tana Bhagats were joining the Congress party and the Non-Cooperation Movement.[124]

The Kabirpanthi Bhagats

The 1920s also witnessed another form of Bhagat movement, whose followers were called Kabirpanthi Bhagats. A guru called Kristi Mohan (also referred to as Kristo Das) made a number of converts among the Khangar Mundas on the borders of Ranchi and Khunti subdivision. No major outward changes were emphasized in lifestyle except that they were required to wear yellow clothes, greet by embracing each other, and emphasize cleanliness.[125] Such Oraon converts observed all old tribal customs related to birth, marriage, and death which did not conflict with the cardinal religious doctrines preached by Kabir. They believed in one God and were required to give up belief in witchcraft, animal sacrifices, offerings and libations to the spirits of the dead, cremation of dead, dancing, animal food, and intoxicating drinks.[126] Kabirpanthi Bhagats however believed in bhuts and malignant spirits who had to be shunned away by *bhajans* or hymns. Dhola Bhagat in fact informed S.C. Roy that he had brought from a *mahant* (religious superior or an ascetic) at Dhamakhera, a book of special bhajans to drive away bhuts.[127] This movement however failed to make a noticeable impact like the Tana Bhagat movement or later the Haribaba movement (1931–32) which swept through the northern parts of Singhbhum and the whole of Ranchi district among the Hos and some Mundas.

Haribaba Movement

In the wider context of the Civil Disobedience movement, in which a sizeable section of Mundas, Oraons and Tana Bhagats were involved

[124] Singh, 'Tribal Peasantry', pp. 46–8.
[125] P.C. Talents, *Census of India, 1921*, Vol. 7, *Bihar and Orissa*, Part 1, *Report*, Superintendent, Government Printing Bihar and Orissa, Patna, 1923, p. 131.
[126] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, pp. 330–4; Talents, *Census of India, 1921*, p. 131.
[127] Roy, *Oraon Religion*, p. 335.

one Duka Ho, who called himself 'Hari Baba' of the Siria-Pos, Saraikela state came into prominence and started becoming 'more and more popular' in north Kolhan.[128] He launched a vigorous attack on the bongas. His followers cut down the trees where the *Desuali* spirits (village spirits) were believed to reside. Everything suspected of having a connection with the bongas was discarded.[129] The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum wrote: '[T]he Hos had a feeling that all was not well and that the local gods were not pulling their weight or were displeased'.[130] The Haribabaites worshipped Hanuman and emphasized purity and cleanliness. They wore a sacred thread; bathed twice a day; adulated Tulsi plant in their courtyards; prohibited consumption of alcohol; and declared Thursday as an off day. They observed trance which could be brought about by fasting before the master, recitation of mantras, shaking of body and head like 'leaves amidst a storm' and running about.[131] The movement was also aimed against the *Tantis*—weaver caste which had used the opportunity of the spread of markets under colonial rule to acquire new power base in the villages—and alien oppressors, the Hindus.[132] Duka also aimed at restoring the pristine rule over land and forests and was looked upon as one of the most intimate disciples of Mahatma Gandhi.[133]

After Duka's arrest, his young wife Nani Kui called 'Hari Mai' moved about preaching about Hari Baba's religion. She set up her akhra and distributed 'Hari Pani' (Holy Water) on the payment of a few paise at Nandpur.[134] Contemporary documents reveal several incidents connected with Hari Mai's followers going around the villages

[128] R.P. Ward, D.C. Singhbhum to A.D. Tuckey, Commissioner of Chotanagpur, 30th July, 1931; Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department Special Branch, File no. 57/31, 1931, BSA.
[129] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 213.
[130] Sanjukta Dasgupta, 'The Changing World of the Singhbhum Hos, 1820–1932', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No 1, January 2006, p. 96.
[131] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 213.
[132] Dasgupta, 'The Changing World', p. 96.
[133] Singh, *Birsa Munda*, pp. 213–24.
[134] R.P. Ward, D.C. Singhbhum to A.D. Tuckey, Commissioner of Chotanagpur, 30th July, 1931; Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department Special Branch, File no. 57/31, 1931, BSA.

with drums, bells, and conches and driving away ghosts. In one such case in July 1932, they went to Bar 'tanr' in Barsatoli beating drums and ringing bells and allegedly took away an idol of *Mahadeo* (Hindu God Shiva) belonging to Habla Pahan. Habla's contention was that he had inherited these idols (four pieces of stone under a Banyan tree) from his father Jata. It should be noted that a few months before the incident, most ryots of the village had taken to worship of Hari Mai and had been going to the concerned Banyan tree with drums, bells, and conches and, holding the idol of Mahadeo they drove away the ghosts.[135] In another instance, Hari Mai's followers broke into a *chaukidar*'s (village watchman's) house and smashed up all household fittings declaring that his wife was a witch. They also opposed the police when an enquiry was set up to inquire into the incident.[136] There were also cases of attack on the followers of the old religion. In May 1932, some followers of Hari Mai invaded and damaged a *Sarna* (traditional place of worship) in Basia belonging to the Mundas, broke fire places, and dug up the earthen pots containing blood of sacrificial animals. They later confessed to the police that they had gone to the spot on the directions of Hari Mai with the objective of catching ghosts.[137] There was also a subtle tirade against Christianity as is evident in cases of quarrel and assault between Christian adivasi converts and followers of Hari Mai over whose religion was 'better'. The missionaries of the affected localities complained to the police that the songs sung by followers of Haribaba in the Tamar region were seditious in nature

> Angrezi Bahadur 'Noy'(destruction)
> Gandhi Mahto ki Jai, Hari Baba ki Jai.[138]

[135] Translation of an FIR reported at Chainpur police station on 01/07/32; Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department Special Branch, File no. 55/32, 1932, BSA.
[136] Extract from J.A. Hubback's Fortnightly Reports dated 12 May, 1932, BSA.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Extract from the confidential diary of the Superintendent of Police dated 1 May, 1932, BSA.

Hari Mai was also found taking bonds from her followers that if they left her religion, they would be fined Rs 100/- by the government, Rs 25/- by the landlord and Rs 5/- by the panchayat.[139] The movement had become popular and throughout May 1932, several Hari Mais were sighted in different villages under Palikoti police station claiming supernatural and healing powers.[140] The Haribaba movement was eventually declared unlawful and their rituals and activities banned with the help of the followers of the old religion.

The Sapha Hors

Around the same time as Haribaba movement, a new reform movement started by Bangham Manjhi known as Sapha Hor attracted a lot of Santhal followers. His teachings supported the practices of the Sapha Hor particularly the daily purificatory bath and abstention from meat and liquor. Bangham also exhorted the Santhals to use exclusively Khadi clothing.[141] Late 1930s saw the Sapha Hor movement drifting towards the Congress party. Their leaders preached about Gandhi Raj and added that the Santhals should adapt to the new laws of the Raj and give up meat and liquor. As a sign of obeisance to the commandments of Mahatma Gandhi, they were required to hoist white flags and fly them in front of their houses.

This period also saw adivasi movements getting intermeshed with the mainstream nationalist politics. While the Hinduised adivasis were being approached by the Congress party, an Oxford educated Christian Munda, Jaipal Singh, started a political movement in 1938 which later came to be known as the Jharkhand movement. Spirits and witches completely disappear from the agenda and the effort was more towards forging a unified adivasi identity. They attempted to downplay all internal tensions (witch killings included) and to form concerted alliance against the Diku Raj (the rule of the dikus). The Adivasi Mahasabha (1938) aspired to create a pan-tribal solidarity, the final goal being the creation

[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Trosi, *Tribal Religion*, p. 257.

of a separate province called Jharkhand.[142] Claiming to represent pan-tribal interests, it focused on defining elements of 'adivasi culture'—community dances, bows and arrows, and Birsa Munda. Most followers were from among the Christian adivasis.[143] The loss in 1946 elections to the State Legislature made Jaipal Singh take an even more exclusive stand: 'We shall take Jharkhand, Jharkhand is the land of adivasis and non adivasi exploiters will be turned out of the region even by violence'.[144] The subsequent realization that the support of non-tribals settled in the region—who outnumbered the adivasis by almost two-to-one—was essential to take the movement forward resulted in the formation of Jharkhand Party in 1950. It drew upon the tribal symbolism by making the cock—the most favourite sacrificial animal—as the party symbol and added that all adivasis were natural members of the party by birth.[145]

The preceding discussion clearly shows that adivasi movements' engagements with spirits and witches were more complex and layered than is normally made out to be. They should not just be seen as simplistic reflections of a 'negative consciousness' or a pristine desire for reform. Neither did they only reflect social and religious tensions. They also formed a part of an extended political programme to counter all forms of external intrusion—sahibs, dikus, and Hindus. They demonstrate how the politics of the supernatural could acquire complex meanings at times—sometimes anti-colonial, sometimes sectarian, and sometimes outright patriarchal—depending on the trajectory of the movement and leadership.

[142] Amit Prakash, *Jharkhand: Politics of Development and Identity*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 2001, p. 98.
[143] K.S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and his Movement: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur*, Seagull, Calcutta, 2002 [1983], p. 214–15. The Roman Catholics were however opposed to glorification of Birsa Munda and using it as a political symbol for the Adivasi Mahasabha.
[144] Prakash, *Jharkhand*, p. 99.
[145] Ibid., p. 101. Cock also symbolized the beginning of the dawn and the Creator God and his all pervadi.

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