


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Santal indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, and the politics of representation

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Abstract

Using different archives, I show how indigeneity was constructed by the Santal themselves during the second half of the nineteenth century, through various figures such as rebels and prophets. This has produced a Santal indigenous knowledge at the interface of orality and writing, revolving around two dimensions—an emergent historical consciousness and a feeling of shared identity, which still informs Adivasi resistance today, enabling them to voice assertion over natural resources. The sacralization of the landscape through pilgrimages and ritual commemorations entails the liberation of formerly encompassed identities, allowing the subaltern communities a certain visibility in the public sphere. Providing a new imagining against dispossession and memory loss, indigenous knowledge, which combines multi-scripturality and ritual innovations, becomes a resource for politics of representation as well as of a common Santal identity.

Keywords: Santal; Central India; indigeneity; indigenous knowledge; politics of representation

Introduction

The present situation among the Santals and other Munda groups of central India seems paradoxical.¹ This region, peripheral in relation to the North Indian plain, is nevertheless crucial for the Indian economy as it contains rich mineral resources. On the one hand, galloping development under the neo-liberal regime is driving the tribals from their land,² with little hope of

¹ More than a dozen tribal communities speak the Austro-Asiatic languages of the Munda family; D. S. Anderson, N. Zide, et al., *The Munda Languages* (London: Routledge, 2015).

² In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Adivasis were thrown out of their villages without any compensation, because the government wanted to take over their forests for revenue

decent work in the cities. On the other hand, we are witnessing a major surge of cultural activity with a strong affirmation of Adivasi identity.³

In this article, I try to show how indigenous knowledge is crucial for understanding this situation. After a discussion of the concepts of indigenous people and indigeneity, I turn to the colonial period. I show how the introduction of writing and the collection of Santal texts under the aegis of Scandinavian missionaries—who arrived in the region in 1867—allow us to hear Santal voices from the nineteenth century. Analysing these texts, I argue that the Santal articulated their own politics of time as they became conscious of the cultural loss they had endured, due to displacement and exploitation. I discuss the reactions of Santal villagers when I presented them with the nineteenth-century texts.

I then turn to the Santal prophet Raghunath Murmu, who invented a Santal script (*ol' chiki*) in Mayurbhanj, Odisha, in the late 1930s. With the script arrived new ideas of sharing knowledge and also a basis for its distribution. Murmu became the first figure of discursive authority among the Santals. He was followed by Santal writers and activists who, through the production of a Santali press, literature, and theatre, spread the idea of a common culture while opening up debate and criticism.

The substance of indigenous knowledge is the subject of the next section. Here we see how this knowledge is intimately related to the forest and embedded in an animistic conception of contiguity between humans, animals, and plants. This contiguity is not a mystical 'closeness to nature' but the product of a long history of engagement with and experience of the environment. The contiguity with the forest is evident in the sacred groves—representing the forest in the village—that are now created even in the towns.

To show the concreteness of experience as a basis for knowledge, I report some of the discourse of locals from Jobradaga, a village in Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand. From their remarks on knowledge and predictability, I go on to comment on the different experiences and perspectives of men and women, which I relate to the gender asymmetry in Santal culture and to new issues of gender emerging today.

The closeness to the land also implies that the landscape is a repository of mythical and historical memory, and so we see contemporary Santals recreating a sacralized landscape, not least by annual pilgrimages to mythical sites such as the Harata cave at Logo Buru in Bokaro district, Jharkhand. Complementing literary production, these events confer visibility on the Santal community.

In my conclusion, I stress how the sharing of knowledge is expressed in various experiences where, together, the non-literate, intellectuals, and

generation. A century later they are still being evicted and still without any decent compensation. See N. Sundar (ed.), *The Scheduled Tribes and Their India: Politics, Identities, Policies, and Work* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 239.

³ Many members of Scheduled Tribes throughout India have adopted the term 'Adivasi' (original inhabitant) for themselves. They continue to suffer discrimination on the basis of their perceived 'primitive' characteristics, even if their languages and cultures are, in some cases, legally recognized and protected.

activists engage in a politics of representation which allows for the consciousness of a common loss and the reformulation of Santal identity.

The concept of indigenous people

In parts of Asia where colonial authorities created a distinct legal category of 'tribe', as they did in India, the colonial category transmuted relatively easily into the transnational category 'indigenous', at least from the perspective of the indigenous peoples' movement. The term 'indigenous people' was used for the first time in 1957 in International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 107 (revised 1989). It gained wide recognition after 1993 with the declaration of that year as the International Year of the Indigenous People. 'Indigenous' is a term applied to people—and by people themselves—engaged in an often-desperate struggle for political rights, for land, and for a place with space in a modern nation's economy and society. Identity and self-representation are vital elements of the political platform of such peoples. One is often disturbed by the essentialism, primordialism, and primitivism, as well as the residual colonialism, inherent in these conceptualizations of identity, which seem out of step with the post-modern, post-colonial period.

The issue of whether the category 'indigenous people' applies to Asia has been much debated.⁴ Karlsson argues that the current mobilization of indigenous peoples in India and their assertions of indigeneity at the United Nations (UN) imply that the idea of indigeneity corresponds to a new globalized political space: 'To assert oneself as an "indigenous people" or to claim what the anthropologist calls the "tribal" or "indigenous" slot,⁵ is to situate oneself within such a space.'⁶ Being 'indigenous' is thus a new way of placing oneself in the world, and of pursuing a new type of politics. He argues that since more and more peoples are claiming the indigenous slot 'we can assume that indigeneity resonates well with the experiences and aspirations of many marginalized people'.⁷

The idea of indigenous people is associated with notions of land and territory. Indigenous people are regarded as original inhabitants, the descendants of people who first occupied a certain territory. But in practice, as Gray remarks, this simply means 'prior inhabitants'.⁸ The term 'indigenous people' is, however, often used in a manner that leaves its territorial reference vague and unclear. It is possible to assert that the Nagas are the indigenous people of Nagaland and the Mundas the autochthones of Chotanagpur, but such

⁴ For this discussion, see A. Béteille, 'The Idea of Indigenous People', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 39, no. 2, April 1998, pp. 187–192. B. G. Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous Slot": Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India', *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, 2003, pp. 403–423. T. Murray Li, 'Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 51, no. 3, June 2010, pp. 385–414.

⁵ Murray Li, 'Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession'.

⁶ Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous Slot"'.
⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁸ A. Gray, 'The Indigenous Movement in Asia', in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, (eds) H. Barnes, A. Gray and B. Kingsbury (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 35–58.

references to territory are inadequate in the case of the Santals who have been migrating to new regions since the late eighteenth century, though they claim to originate from Hazaribagh in Jharkhand state.

According to the classification promoted by the ILO, UN, and other international agencies, indigenous people constitute a distinct category because they have endured a history of spoliation and consequently deserve special entitlements as members of designated communities to compensate for the prejudice and loss they have incurred. This raises questions regarding the entitlements of Scheduled Tribes in India both in their traditional areas of habitation and beyond. While the word 'indigenous' has become part of the legal discourse since indigenous people's rights, promoted by the UN, are now covered by international law, there is a discrepancy between the idea of 'indigenous' as it appears in the international discourse and the many local ideas about indigeneness one encounters in different parts of the world.⁹ In India, some of these rights were integrated in the principles of redistributive justice which emerged in the period 1946–1950 and are tied to the concept of Adivasi,¹⁰ an equivalent of 'aboriginal', derived from the Hindi *ādi* (beginning) and *vāsī* (resident), which literally means (descendants of the) 'original inhabitants' of a given place.¹¹ More importantly, Adivasi refers to forms of self-expression and is tied to identities of protest, since the tribal regions were identified as the 'fourth world' that face internal colonialism from the non-tribal regions.¹²

To 'the people'—in my case the Santals, who over the past hundred years have become politically active and have organized themselves on many fronts—'cultural identity' has become an extremely important matter and a platform for self-representation.

Indigeneity in the colonial period

An important feature of indigeneity in most definitions is the permanent attachment of a group of people to a fixed area of land in a way that marks them as culturally distinct. But dispossession and displacement have been a constitutive part of Adivasi (tribal) subject formation in India from colonial times. The introduction of individual landownership by the permanent settlement in 1770 was to result, later, in the alienation of Adivasi lands and in the

⁹ B. Kingsbury, "'Indigenous Peoples' as an International Legal Concept', in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, (eds) Barnes et al., pp. 13–34.

¹⁰ The term 'Adivasi' was first used in a political context in the Jharkhand region of central India, with the formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha (the Great Council of Ādivāsī) in Ranchi in 1938: S. Bosu Mullick and R. D. Munda, *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India* (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 2003), pp. 4–17.

¹¹ See V. Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, no. 51, 1999, pp. 3589–3595; B. G. Karlsson and T. Subba (eds), *Indigeneity in India* (London: Kegan Paul, 2006).

¹² Archana Prasad, 'Adivasis and the Trajectories of Political Mobilization in Contemporary India', in *First Citizens. Studies in Adivasis, Tribals and Indigenous Peoples in India*, (ed.) Meena Radhakrishna (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2016), p. 319.

migration of Santals to clear jungles or work as contract labour.¹³ As Li argues, a common approach to the land question in the colonial period was to divide the population, separating people who were designated as competent market subjects with individual rights to land from those who should be protected from dispossession by consolidating their attachment to land on a collective basis.¹⁴ Administrative arrangements confined 'tribal' populations to districts where the general laws were suspended and rule was conducted by special agents, empowered to exercise a paternalistic form of authority backed by notions of 'customary' law.¹⁵ The British also restricted market transactions in tribal areas, forbidding all trade outside supervised marketplaces, since, citing their chronic propensity to fall into debt, they were convinced tribals could not handle money. Often, these regulations also responded to pressure from below, as tribal groups launched rebellions and uprisings to voice their grievances against nontribal landlords and moneylenders.¹⁶ All this also applies to the Santals.

The transformations which occurred in the colonial period have inspired the Santals to produce their own idea of indigeneity, perceived as a more authentic identity than tribe, caste, or nationality. The displacement of the Santals during the colonial period produced a split in their clan system as they spread out to find employment in indigo factories or in building railways. They were recruited to clear the jungles of the Rajmahal Hills and other regions from around 1850.¹⁷ Displaced from their original homeland in Chotanagpur (Hazaribagh), the Santals were exposed to the exactions of zamindars and moneylenders (*mahājuns*). Banerjee argues convincingly that for the Santals,¹⁸ the emergence of indebtedness as an economic experience was also tantamount to the emergence of indebtedness as a political phenomenon, when being in debt became the only way to be at home in colonial modernity. The politics of time which effected the position of the colonized as an eternal debtor affected their sense of future and alienated their sense of history. Banerjee, thus, postulates that exchange was the first act of representation.

The Santals, already hard workers, became diligent and peaceful primitives. I argue that they did not accept, however, the exchange whereby the colonial

¹³ On the transformations imposed on tribal economy by colonialism, see K. S. Singh, 'Colonial Transformation of Tribal Society in Middle India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 13, no. 30, 29 July 1978, pp. 1221–1232.

¹⁴ Murray Li, 'Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession', pp. 385–414.

¹⁵ K. Ghosh, 'Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenoussness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 21, no. 4, 2006, pp. 501–534.

¹⁶ Pratima Banerjee, 'Re-Presenting Pasts: Santals in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *History and the Present*, (eds) P. Chatterjee and A. Ghosh (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 242–273; K. Ghosh, 'Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenoussness, Locality, and the Transnational Sphere in Jharkhand, India', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 21, no. 4, 2006, pp. 501–534.

¹⁷ On the famine in the nineteenth century in Chotanagpur, see V. Damodaran 'Gender, Forests and Famine in 19th-Century Chotanagpur, India', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, pp. 133–163.

¹⁸ P. Banerjee, 'Debt, Time and Extravagance', in P. Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-Writing in a Colonial Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 3.

state offered law and education in return for tax and revenue, since the Santals perceived law as repressive and knew only too well that they were often cheated by revenue officers—a situation which resulted in the Santal rebellion of 1855.

The rebellion (Hul) was, above all, an expression of economic and social revindication, and the Santals organized massive looting of Hindu and British property. After Independence in 1947, legal provisions such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution recognize the vulnerabilities of Adivasi populations and seek to ameliorate their situation by restricting land transfers and reserving electoral representation in Scheduled Areas. However, these legal safeguards have not prevented further dispossession. Li's argument about 'the communal fix' is that it is being undermined by 'capitalism from below' which results from a tension between communal-tribal and individual peasant identities.¹⁹ In the post-independence period 'the ideology of tribal economy and society' emerged, initiated in the colonial period and still intact, according to which bounded tribes occupy bounded space, equitably share access to land and forest, and stand united in their commitment to a communal and subsistence-oriented way of life.

Today, dispossession of land continues in Jharkhand, with growing inequality among tribals. But economic grievances alone are not the substance of indigeneity. Cultural, linguistic, and religious factors are equally important. This leads me to consider subjectivity as a central theme in Adivasi Studies. As Rycroft and Dasgupta put it, 'Studies of subjectivity enable the grounds upon which collective identities are constructed to be revisited, affirmed and contested.'²⁰ My argument is that the Adivasis, in this case the Santals, are themselves makers and agents of their own indigeneity.

Indigeneity, knowledge, and subjectivity

In a text called 'Indigenous Incentives', K. Ghosh writes of the ILO convention as 'the problem of indigeneity framed within a distinctly Euro-American narrative of a progressive liberation, an imagination that deeply informs the Declaration itself.'²¹ Quoting the volume edited by de la Cadena and Starn, *Indigenous Experience Today*,²² Ghosh notes that the authors pose the problem of indigeneity not as a natural line of progress but, rather, as a more complex over-determined field.²³ He cites: 'Reckoning with indigeneity,' they observe, 'demands recognizing it as a relational field of governance, subjectivities and knowledges that involves us all—indigenous and nonindigenous—in the making and remaking of its structures of power and imagination.'²⁴ Yet, Ghosh

¹⁹ Murray Li, 'Capitalism, and the Management of Dispossession'.

²⁰ D. J. Rycroft and S. Dasgupta (eds), *The Politics of Belonging: Becoming Adivasi* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

²¹ K. Ghosh, 'Indigenous Incentives', in *Indigenous Knowledge and Learning in Asia and Africa*, (eds) D. Kapoor and E. Shizha (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 35–46.

²² M. de la Cadena and O. Starn (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

²³ Ghosh, 'Indigenous Incitements', p. 36.

²⁴ de la Cadena and Starn, *Indigenous Experience Today*, p. 3.

remarks, their account is still haunted by the persistent reappearance of a narrative of progress. At the very beginning of the book, they write: ‘Today, indigenous peoples have asserted their place in 21st century global culture, economy, and politics.’²⁵

Ghosh criticizes the progress narrative because it treats indigenous people as abject in Agamben’s sense—as the embodiment of oppression, subjection, and powerlessness.²⁶ For Ghosh, the potential for Adivasis of sovereignty and autonomy derives from their struggles, and he stresses that they have been the makers of their own form of indigeneity, developing their agency through a series of rebellions.²⁷ Ghosh’s main point is that indigenous people should be seen as agents, in terms of political subjectivity and peoplehood, and not defined by dispossession and displacement: they are tracing their own trajectory of indigeneity. Ghosh argues that Adivasis have been a potent political force throughout Indian modernity. They won customary law protection and some form of territorial sovereignty quite early in the nineteenth century.²⁸ Today, he says, ‘the most important resistance to neoliberal capitalism has emerged around land struggles, including a large number of Adivasi ones, which have been facilitated by the tradition of movements against land-dispossession in the last three decades, a tradition which is overwhelmingly Adivasi in location, content and characterization’.²⁹

I argue that indigenous people should be understood in terms of their own trajectory of political subjectivity. For Ghosh the emergence of an indigenous identity must be set in the context of indigenous or Adivasi customary law in India.³⁰ Without denying the importance of customary law, which is crucial for the Santals, instead I will show how knowledge has become indigenous and has informed the Santals in developing their agency.

Santal orality

Santali is India’s most widely spoken Austro-Asiatic language, and one of India’s officially recognized minority languages, but it still suffers from a lack of public recognition. In the states where Santali is spoken, little public education is offered in the language, which is often seen as a dialect. But

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 1–2.

²⁶ Ghosh, ‘Indigenous Incitements’, p. 37. See also G. Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

²⁷ Among them, the Paharia violence (1772–1780), the Santal uprising (1780–1785), the Bhil rebellion (1819), the Munda revolt in Palamau (1819–1820), the Chuar rebellions by the inhabitants of hills and forests of former Manbhum, Bankura, and Midnapore (1820s), the Bhumij rebellions (1832–1833), the Kol (i.e. Ho) uprising (1830–1832), the Sardār movement, which lasted four decades in the early nineteenth century and aimed at restoring pre-British Adivasi land rights to the Adivasis, the Santal Hul (‘rebellion’) of 1855, and, finally, the Munda rebellion of 1895 were the most important.

²⁸ Ghosh, ‘Indigenous Incitements’, pp. 38–39.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

Santals are very conscious of the separateness of their language, which they value highly.

I would hold that the richness of language makes up for the poverty of history in granting a real culture to the Santals. Before turning to the emergence of Santal written texts, we should note that Santal oral forms constitute a universe of discourse. The Santals are fond of their language and love to play with words, and Santal indigenous theory of speech defines a vast range of registers of discourse, which revolve around the idea that the tribal deities—*bongas*—lost their original language when they were fighting each other. Humans try to recreate this divine speech, forging metaphors and narratives. Even today among Santals, traditional speech events mark important occasions, such as celebrating past heroes. In brief, the introduction of writing and development of narratives have not tarnished the prestige of orality and the power of speech. Among the Santal and other Mundari groups, indigenous knowledge as the knowledge of the ancestors (*hapram ko bidia*) revolves around two dimensions: the emergence of historical consciousness and a shared identity related to language.

Colonial transformations affected the discourse of the Santal rebellion leaders, Sidhu and Kanhu, who in 1855 claimed a history and culture for their own group. The Santals of Daman-i-koh revolted against the moneylenders, the zamindars, and the British.³¹ Sidhu and Kanhu were possessed by Thakur who bestowed on them *parwana*—inspired speech—but we also know that they were sent to a Brahman to learn to read and write. Their fascination for writing is clear in a text, *Hul reak' katha* (The Story of the Rebellion), where it is told that they realized 'that they did not know how to read and write'. Here, we understand how Sidhu and Kanhu deliberated that mastering reading and writing would allow them to control the Raj.³² Writing was already internalized by the Santals as a kind of magic associated with colonial bureaucracy, which probably explains their later eagerness to acquire literacy.

The Scandinavian missionaries considered the Santals as a nation in the Herderian sense. The national identity that the missionaries sought to identify was, above all, a matter of language. For the missionaries, who were not ready to locate Santal identity in the historicity of the Santal rebellion, language made up for the poverty of history in that it granted them a real culture.³³

³¹ The Daman-i-koh was created in 1832 as the new administrative territory of the Rajmahal Hills bordered by Bhagalpur district in the North and Murshidabad district in the South. For an excellent map, see D. J. Rycroft, *Representing Rebellion. Visual Aspects of Counter-Insurgency in Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), p. 97.

³² This story was written 36–37 years after the rebellion. But the text looks back at the defeat and tries to explain it. For them, the rebellion failed due to the greed of Sidhu and Kanhu, who appropriated the wealth and women of others. But they had a vision of a powerful being who told them to start the rebellion: they declared that Ṭhākur had come down, ordering them to reinstate justice in their society. See P. B. Andersen, M. Carrin and S. Soren, *From Fire Rain to Santal Insurrection: Reasserting Identity through Narratives* (Delhi: Manohar, 2011), pp. 172–189.

³³ M. Carrin and H. Tambs-Lyche, *An Encounter of Peripheries: Santals, Missionaries and their Changing Worlds, 1867–1900* (Delhi: Manohar, 2008), p. 312.

The missionaries needed to master Santali in order to translate the Scriptures.³⁴ In 1887, L. O. Skrefsrud published *Horoko Hapram ko reak' Katha* (The Stories of the Santal Ancestors), a compendium of traditional stories that he had collected in Dumka from Kolean Guru, a learned Santal elder. The missionaries taught Roman script to Santal collaborators, who collected stories dictated to them in Santali by a vast number of informants.³⁵ They wanted to store tribal knowledge by transforming heathen beliefs into folklore, so the Santals would gradually cease to worship their deities (*bongas*) and embrace Christianity. From the very first, Skrefsrud had started to collect Santali words with a view to publishing a dictionary,³⁶ which he devised as an encyclopedic work that would store not only words but also indigenous knowledge.

Reading and discussing the archives

The collection of texts lasted for 40 years and include around 3,000 pages in Santali.³⁷ The texts are not dated, so their date must be inferred from their content. The Santal articulation of various memories dealing with real events (*itihās*) and villages stories (*gam kahini*) evoke Dangi temporalization in western India.³⁸ Skaria's reading of Dangi *goth* (stories) articulates two categories of time: *moglai*, which stands for the time of *chut*, corresponding to the historian's 'precolonial', and *mandini*, which stands for the time of rupture, the colonial period when *chut* was lost. The Santal narratives were written down and thus differ from the Dangi *goth*, but these stories have also persisted in Santal oral memory. The narratives in the archive offer diachronic as well as spatial diversity, since chiefs and priests, and men and women of different clans had seen events from different locations and at different times. Some had witnessed the Hul during their youth, others had been living in tea gardens in Assam.³⁹

By the time these stories were collected, the rebellion of 1855 had become an important time marker. The narratives often place *hul pahil* (the time before the rebellion characterized by famine and anxiety) in opposition to *hul tayom* (the time pervaded by disillusion but marked by the idea of resistance). The time before the rebellion includes two different periods.

³⁴ In 1873, Skrefsrud, a Norwegian missionary, wrote the first Santali-language grammar using the Roman script.

³⁵ In the 1870s, Skrefsrud taught Santal collaborators to write Santali, using Roman script with diacritical marks for the specific sounds of the language.

³⁶ The dictionary was finally compiled by his successor P. O. Bodding, *A Santal Dictionary* (5 vols) (Oslo: Det Norske Videnskaps Akademi, 1932–36). See also M. Carrin, 'The Making of an Encyclopedic Dictionary: How P. O. Bodding Re-Enchanted Santal Words', *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)*, Vol. IX, no. 2, August 2019, pp. 1–13.

³⁷ The Santal archives were gifted to Oslo University Library after Bodding's death in 1938.

³⁸ A. Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁹ The Hul was the 1855 rebellion in Santal Parganas (present-day northern Jharkhand) led by the Santal brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu, against the British authorities and Hindu upper castes in protest at the onerous tax and revenue burdens.

First comes the golden age when the ancestors used to hunt and met in holy places to consult the omens before deciding where to go. Stories such as *Sendra reak katha* (The Story of the Hunt)⁴⁰ describe the pleasure of hunting when game was abundant and young men were taught by the Dihri Baba, the hunt priest, who taught them not to kill game indiscriminately. Young boys remembered the teaching, which aimed at fashioning their masculinity through collective discipline.

Santal excitement at the hunt evokes the pleasure Bhils experienced in the Dangs, where Skaria shows that wildness, with the freedom it offered to hunt, travel, or drink, stood for an indigenous ideal of pleasure and power.⁴¹ Skaria shows that Dangi memories and the historians' archives can both be read to argue that 'wildness' as a mode of being is not antagonistic to 'civilization'. In the Dangs, wildness also offered the tribes a political alternative to the politics of outside rulers since the Bhil and Kokni gained a certain autonomy vis-a-vis the Maratha kings.

Unlike the Bhils, whose chiefs wrought alliances with Rajputs in western India, the Santals claimed to be egalitarian,⁴² although they too had chiefs. But at the Santal hunt, the annual Lo Bir Sendra (the Judgement of the Burnt Forest) took place, where the word of any villager was equal to that of a chief of several villages (*pargana*).⁴³ Several texts dealing with this first period concern migrations, when the Santals followed their chiefs as they lifted the sal branch, symbol of the ancestors.⁴⁴ Even so, any chief's decision had to be confirmed by oracles. This time, it is said, is lost, along with the ancestors' places of origin.

Then comes the time just before the rebellion, marked by dispossession and loss of land. One myth tells us that the introduction of property and wealth corresponds to the age of iron (Kali Yug). Because of these changes, the Santals had to enter the cash economy and pay land revenue to the British authorities. For the Santal narrators, the idea of economic surplus is something anti-social: the accumulation that enables profit can only be made to the detriment of someone else. These ideas are rooted in Santal mythology, where stories abound of deities (*bongas*) who steal from the rich and redistribute the bounty to the poor. More precisely, gossip implicitly accuses wealthy villagers of worshipping *kombro bongas* (thief deities) since, for the Santals, the wealthy always steal, thus depriving others.⁴⁵ The time after the rebellion seems to correspond to the invention of a certain reflexivity, and contrasts with the earlier time when Santals were deprived of their lands by the moneylenders.

⁴⁰ Andersen et al., *From Fire Rain to Santal Insurrection*.

⁴¹ Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*.

⁴² They supposedly had kings in their kingdom of Champa, a mythical place which cannot be localized on any map.

⁴³ W. Archer, *Tribal Law and Justice: A Report on the Santal* (Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1984).

⁴⁴ Sal (*Shorea Robusta*, L.) is a kind of teak.

⁴⁵ Andersen et al., *From Fire Rain to Santal Insurrection*, pp. 342–347.

The archives contain several types of texts, which may be grouped in three main categories.⁴⁶

First, myths of creation, exodus, and dispersion of the clan reflect a Santal historicity, while migrations are the leitmotif of myths explaining the origin of sub-clans. In creating a rank order, these myths effectuate an important transformation, expressing the disenchantment that follows the golden age.⁴⁷

Second, village stories (*gram kahini*) offer us windows into village life, showing how men and deities cohabit and communicate. Specific salutations used for different kin convey the content of the relationship. Prohibitions signal the invisible presence of deities propitiated during rituals. Some village stories allude to disputes or conflicts or even to cases of witchcraft.

A third genre is represented by folktales (*kahini*) which, among other themes, describe the peripheral position of the Santals exploited by moneylenders. Often the Santals escape their oppressors thanks to their humour and astuteness, a strategy described by Scott.⁴⁸ The pattern of domination is reflected here: that of the non-tribal (*diku*) (and also the inner *diku*) who usurps power or manipulates the deities (*bongas*) to take advantage of his Santal brothers. Omens, riddles, songs, prayers, and witchcraft incantations are also found in the archive texts.

Several narratives deny the value of colonial labour. In one text, labour becomes the metaphor for human sacrifice when a British sahib bribes a *chaukidar* to get hold of a Santal worker, whom he pushes violently under the foundation of a bridge, since human sacrifice is needed to complete the work. This, incidentally, is one of very few texts where the British take an active role. In this inversion the sahib becomes the barbarian who orders a human sacrifice.⁴⁹ The story shows the resistance to colonial values, a resistance that aids in forming a consciousness of oppression and reformulating Santal identity.

The Santal archives: A history from below

The examples of Santal writing since the 1890s offer testimony to the social and cultural changes of the colonial period, as seen by Santal writers. They express a Santal view of changes otherwise documented mainly through colonial sources. When the narrators living in villages around Dumka, the headquarters of the mission, dictated stories to the missionaries' collaborators, their aim was to document Santal language and culture. But through the act

⁴⁶ I started to work on the archives in 1974 and microfilmed the collection in order to study the texts and discuss them with Santal people. Meanwhile, S. Soren prepared an index of the archives: S. K. Soren, *Santalia: Catalogue of Santali Manuscripts in Oslo*, NIAS Reports, No. 41 (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1999). Today, the archives have been digitalized by Oslo University Library and Santals are able to consult them via the internet.

⁴⁷ M. Carrin, *Le Parler des dieux. Le discours rituel Santal entre l'oral et l'écrit (Inde)* (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2015).

⁴⁸ J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Form of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ M. Carrin, 'From Forest to Factory: The Santal Conception of Labour', in *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India*, (ed.) P. Robb (New Delhi: Oxford, 1994), pp. 150–158.

of dictating their narratives, they positioned themselves as subjects capable of reinventing their belief in the *bongas*, to prove to the missionaries that it was not mere superstition.⁵⁰ The result is narratives in which the Santals recast their traditions as knowledge, institutions, and laws, constructing themselves as a community (*samaj*).

Bodding, who had taken over the leadership of the mission in 1910 and was responsible for the collection, considered the Santal stories to be an equivalent to European folklore and paid no attention to the muted voices that tried to express themselves between the lines. This particularly applies to Sagram Murmu, his main collaborator. The missionary acknowledged Murmu's knowledge of oral literature and his ability to write Santali fluently. But he was not ready to accept his collaborator as an author and often criticized him for giving his own opinion. Two long stories written by Sagram Murmu—*The Creation Story of the Sons of Man* and *The Origin of the Clans*—show how he conceived a literary project.⁵¹

The archives offer us the deployment of memories of the subalternized Santals, who saw it as important to communicate what seemed essential in their lives, marked by dispossession and exploitation. When dealing with taboo or conflict, the writers sometimes stress that some villagers will react like the characters of the story, while others will think differently. In presenting these, the narrator reflects on varied opinions that Santals might have of their leaders, describing the Santal community as a world structured by the custom (*colon*) of the ancestors. The archives represent an indigenous inventory exploring the past, showing the importance of knowledge (*bidia*), since the ancestors are those who knew.

The question of knowledge is central to these narratives, since some narrators justify their statements and tell us that they have witnessed particular events. When they feel they lack information, they simply say: 'I cannot say' (*ban lai dare a kana in*) or 'Who knows?' (*okoe badaia?*) referring to the loss (*hirin*). But when they want to convince their audience, they add, 'This is the truth' (*sarige*). If a particular truth seems difficult to believe, they sometimes add 'Some do believe (*patiau kana ko*), others do not.'

There is no a unique truth here, but several truths which reflect conflicting ideologies where Santal values, such as the ancestors, the deities (*bongas*), the heroes of the Hul, and the virtues of kin and friends are deconstructed to produce a threatening message: the Santals have lost some of their social cohesion. More importantly, the stories of the archives evoke Foucaultian views about the history of truth, as well as the relationships between the will to

⁵⁰ Though the missionaries published three volumes of folktales and a volume on folk medicine, the tales describe village life located in a remote temporality and the historicity apparent in other narratives is lost. See P. O. Bodding, *Santal Folk-Tales*, Vols 1–3 (Oslo: H. Aschehoug and Co., 1925–1929) and P. O. Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1986; reprint of 1925 original).

⁵¹ We may see him as the author who wrote the first 'national novel', creating the imaginary community in Benedict Anderson's sense: P. Andersen, 'Sagram Murmu and the Formation of a Linguistic Identity', in *The Politics of Ethnicity in India, Nepal and China*, (eds) M. Carrin, P. Kanungo and G. Toffin (Delhi: Primus 2014), pp. 237–252.

truth and various forms of power,⁵² since the narrators are trying to recover Santal indigeneity. But they are trapped within the colonial power structure, represented in the archive material by the sahibs and missionaries. How did the pursuit of truth combine historically with the will to knowledge? Is it possible to construct a genealogy of figures of discursive authority?

In the late 1970s, I read some of the texts from the archives to Santal audiences in villages of North Odisha and today's Jharkhand. I tried to obtain some clarification of the texts, but I paid attention to the reactions of the audience, who often stressed that the narrators could not be wrong, since they were ancestors. Priests and healers had a more nuanced approach when discussing ritual prescriptions and stories involving deities, and often remarked that several opinions may exist, as well as several degrees of knowledge. Some of the elder healers (*ojhas*) took notes when they heard a mantra that was new to them. Other texts focusing on the pleasure of playing with words or being happy (*raskau*) with one's friends were seen as ancestors' knowledge (*hapram ko bidia*) that must be transmitted to children, 'as it came with the bones' and lasted throughout life. It also happened that while listening to the stories of the archives, the villagers brought forth a similar narrative to convince me that nothing had really changed, while the reading made the colonial epoch present. Still, they liked to consider the texts of the archives as a testimony to be validated or contradicted by contemporary experience. In this perspective, the reading of the Santal archives offered the opportunity to juxtapose the idea of *raskau*, 'the joy of life' as described in the stories, to the disenchantment of the present.

The making of indigenous knowledge

I shall now try to show how the apparently opposing trends of dispossession and identity assertion are knitted together in the fabric of indigenous knowledge, which provides an ontological base for the cultural response to deprivation. I shall talk of knowledge, rather than culture, exploring aspects of what we call 'indigenous knowledge' and its relationship to tradition and to reinvented religion.

The narratives in the texts are produced by a semantic memory which aims at organizing and transmitting knowledge. Geertz tells us his book *Local Knowledge* is to be read 'as a series of demonstrations of the explanatory power of setting *sui generis* phenomena in echoing connection'.⁵³ Here, he has privileged knowledge over culture, since, as Barth later put it, 'Knowledge provides people with materials for reflection and premise for action, whereas "culture" too readily comes to embrace also those reflections and those actions.'⁵⁴ Moreover, actions become knowledge to others only after

⁵² In the philosophy of M. Foucault, truth does not emerge from knowledge as such but is constructed through the workings of power relations in history.

⁵³ C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁵⁴ F. Barth, 'An Anthropology of Knowledge', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 43, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–17.

the fact. Thus the concept of 'knowledge' situates its object in a particular, unequivocal way, relative to events, actions, and social relationships.

What makes knowledge indigenous? I shall try to place indigenous knowledge in different cultural contexts, to show its different uses and examine its ideological premises. In privileging indigenous knowledge as a departure point, I argue that indigenous people can produce strategies of resistance, not simply in terms of protest but also by forging new ideas.

Barth mentions three interconnected aspects of knowledge to be distinguished analytically. 'First, any tradition of knowledge contains a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world. Secondly, it must be instantiated and communicated in one or several media as a series of partial representations in the form of words, concrete symbols, pointing gestures, actions.' This perspective allows for agency, requiring us to pay close attention to the knowers and to their acts—the people who hold, learn, produce, and apply knowledge in their various activities. And thirdly, knowledge 'will be distributed, communicated, employed, and transmitted within a series of instituted social relations'.⁵⁵

For the Santals who rediscovered the archives in the 1970s, the main aim was not to establish historical accuracy, but to share resonance (*sade*) and the consciousness of loss (*hirin*). For the Santal intellectual today, this consciousness of loss becomes a strength since it allows them to conceive an emotional account of the past, the texture of which is not necessarily linear. Indigenous knowledge is part of the practice of identity as a process and the constitution of meaningful worlds, of schemes that have been wrought historically.

The invention of an indigenous script

Santali literacy and education expanded from the 1920s in a political and social landscape where Adivasis were suffering discrimination since they were perceived as backward and primitive by the caste Hindus. In the late 1930s, industrial development had resulted in increasing land alienation and contributed to the development of a 'coolie proletariat'. In 1938, Jaipal Singh, the leader of the Adivasi Mahasabha, led a charge to create an independent state of Jharkhand, including the Santali majority blocks of southeast West Bengal, southern Bihar, and northern Orissa.

Then, in the late 1930s, Raghunath Murmu, a Santal teacher living in Mayurbhanj, Odisha, invented a new alphabet, reacting against the writing of Santali in various Indian alphabets, in order to combat the stigma attached to backwardness and illiteracy. The letters of his script—*ol' chiki*—are arranged alphabetically but motivated by ideogrammatic elements. Each symbol has a meaning that corresponds with the pronunciation. The semantics of the ideograms express three main dimensions: the cosmos and its elements (fire, earth, water, tree, and mountain), while a second dimension relates to the movements of the body, and a third to human activities: ploughing, cutting, or

⁵⁵ Ibid.

threshing. The characters of the script evoke the language of the branches as practised by hunters,⁵⁶ and use other strong similes, such as the basic postures of the body.

Murmu also knew weaving and he combined his talent as an artist with his knowledge of Oriya and Devanagari scripts. He argued that *ol' chiki* was phonetically more coherent than other scripts, expressing Adivasi sensitivity as rooted in daily experience. The script should express the daily routine of the human body, to favour its internalization by children and adults. When I lived in Murmu's village in the late 1970s he used to say that by learning the script, the Santals will discover the ancient truth, hidden by the *bongas*. The script became a way to recover Adivasi sensitivity, expressed in the resonance (*sade*) of Santali language, proffering value to Santal sounds as is done in echo words and in music.

Murmu saw his script as a gift of the deities, and several stories tell us how he rediscovered the script, which had been forgotten or even stolen, provoking the cultural amnesia of the Santals. Approaching a certain rock, he was suddenly possessed by Maran Buru, the god of the creation myth, and then he could see the 'luminous letters'. When he returned home, he was accompanied by a panther who, instead of attacking him, showed him the way. It was the panther, he affirmed, who convinced him he must not only introduce the script, but also regenerate Santal society. He then shut himself away for almost a week to work out a first notation of the revealed signs, which he kept improving for more than a year, referring to various Indian scripts such as Devanagari, Eastern Brahmi, and Roman but also developing his own graphic system to meliorate the *ol' chiki* script.⁵⁷ The signs written on the rock, he said, had been lost and only a man with a pure heart could rediscover them.

I argue that the panther, as a wild animal, is a link to the purity of landscape and forest, and inscribes Murmu's project in a new direction—the return to wildness as a purification process. He later developed his philosophy in theatre, preaching that the Adivasis must return to the forest, fuse with the elements, and remember they had been hunters and gatherers. This was a way to deny the proletarianization the Santals endured. Murmu declared that his followers must recover the spartiate values of the ancestors, when the Santals were kings of the forest and knew how to enjoy the pleasure of life.

The trope of a script lost and rediscovered is common in the invention of Adivasi scripts in the 1930s and 1940s. Leaders from other Adivasi communities produced their own script, like the Ho Lako Bodra who concurrently started a religious movement in Singhbhum. The Kharia Pyara Master from Odisha and the Saora Gomango from Andhra also invented scripts in the 1930s, which were not implemented but contributed to create a consciousness around language.⁵⁸ The tribal scripts served as a powerful means to restore

⁵⁶ The language of the branches helps the hunters to find their way in the forest.

⁵⁷ These scripts are associated with Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, and English.

⁵⁸ Carrin, *Le Parler des dieux*.

disrupted time. Thus, the spiritual power of the script was meant to preserve the sacred contents of the past, as well as to reactivate the idea of a golden age.

Murmu as a figure of discursive authority

Raghunath Murmu was also a social reformer who strongly advocated education as a way to struggle against casteism. Through his writing and speeches he wanted to present the Santals with a stimulating vision of their own past, from which they could renew their traditions. Murmu, who dreamt of translating Tolstoy's novels into Santali,⁵⁹ had a pedagogic project: he wanted to fight against village chiefs and priests whose authority was too 'oppressive', to promote a generation of young, enlightened Santals who would engage in teaching *ol' chiki* as volunteers.

Murmu saw his script as a weapon to strengthen Santali and the position of the Santals in Odisha and the neighbouring states.⁶⁰ From 1942 to 1948, he wrote plays where *raskau*, the 'pleasure of life', was made to express an Adivasi sensitivity, a way of life where Adivasis lived in harmony with their environment. He wanted to convince the Santals they could still enjoy life and drink rice-beer (*handi*) without feeling the guilt Hindus and Christians tried to impose on them.

When Bidu and Chandan, the main heroes of Murmu's dramas, are lost in the forest, they see the luminous *ol' chiki* letters on a rock and are saved: literacy becomes a path to salvation. These pieces were, and still are, staged, allowing the illiterate to share the prophet's ideas.

The implementation of Murmu's script in the 1950s, which was supported by the raja of Mayurbhanj and businessmen in Jamshedpur,⁶¹ allowed the young to develop a new feeling of identity. Since then, a large network of cultural associations has developed, operating in several states. Murmu also started a reform movement aimed at redistributing knowledge in a more democratic way, calling on the youth to teach the script and perform in village theatre.

Murmu had hoped that other groups, such as the Mundas, would adopt the *ol' chiki* script, which would then become the second official script of the future state of Jharkhand, but they refused, for various reasons. Despite this cultural

⁵⁹ Murmu and his son Sidlal Murmu, who later became the first Santal Member of Parliament, organized night events to 'talk about Tolstoi'. They tried to convince the villagers that they could free themselves through education.

⁶⁰ In the late 1970s Murmu showed me maps of the different states where the Santals lived. It was evident to him that the script could contribute to create a Santal identity 'beyond the states' borders'. See N. Choksi, 'Scripting the Border: Script Practices and Territorial Imagination among Santali Speakers in Eastern India', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, Vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, pp. 47–63. Choksi points to a tension between 'trans-border' linguistic homogeneity and 'bordered' linguistic heterogeneity in discussions around script. The new graphic 'bordering' of Indian states created a situation where many newly literate Santals could communicate orally, but not read or write, across borders, since their literacy was circumscribed by the political territories in which they resided (p. 51).

⁶¹ In 1949, the raja of Mayurbhanj resisted the inclusion of his state into Odisha, and he mobilized the Santals to fight for him. In defending his state, he argued that he had been promoting literacy. Businessmen paid for the making of the font of *ol' chiki*.

fragmentation, the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines, and books in the Munda-speaking communities produced a media domain defining, at least for the Santal, a window into a unified community. The new script was used to print newspapers that were read by Santals living in the states of Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Assam. As Choksi writes: 'It is in this social and political milieu, marked by divisions of caste and language both in relation to urban-rural divides as well as within rural communities themselves, where Santali language writing and the production and circulation of printed media artefacts, such as magazines and newspapers, have become an especially crucial feature of political assertion.'⁶² During the early 1970s, the importance of print for Santali political assertion became manifest during rallies for the promotion of Santali language, Adivasi cultural programmes, and celebrations of important events such as the Santal rebellion. For the Santals living in different states, the script had become a tool of self-representation.

The *ol' chiki* movement mobilized Santal youth, and volunteers taught the script to children and adults in Odisha. In the 1960s the government of Odisha recognized the script and sponsored schoolbooks printed in *ol' chiki*.⁶³ The revealed script strengthened equality and anti-caste feelings and found a large Adivasi audience. *Ol' chiki* is probably the only tribal script so far that has established itself significantly in printing, teaching, and distribution. Through journals and other publications it has strengthened the status of Santali in the public sphere and aided its recognition as one of the 13 officially recognized minority languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution of 2003.

In Odisha, the *ol' chiki* script has become an up-to-date means of communication and a symbol of high culture. The internet and mass media offer access to Santali literature to both elites and to the masses, and they constitute a new forum for preserving the cultural heritage. But in Bengal, as in Jharkhand, most writers use Indian vernacular scripts, or even Roman script,⁶⁴ to convey their message.⁶⁵

During the last 30 years, Santal associations and the Santali press have been popularizing various forms of literature in different scripts,⁶⁶ ranging from short stories to novels, poetry, drama, and village theatre, building a cultural awareness which aids Santals and other Adivasis to resist assimilation.⁶⁷ The importance of print became manifest as a political assertion, and a large

⁶² N. Choksi, 'Language to Script: Graphic Practice and the Politics of Authority in Santali-Language Print Media, Eastern India', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, no. 5, 2017, pp. 1519–1560.

⁶³ The Rairangpur socio educational and cultural associations in Mayurbhanj (Odisha) took up the task of promoting the Santal script language and literature in the different states.

⁶⁴ In Bengal, Santals aspiring to middle class status prefer to write Santali in Eastern Brahmi (Bengali) script.

⁶⁵ The movement has been influential in the Santal Parganas in Jharkhand where a curriculum in Santali using *ol' chiki* has been used at Sidhu Kanhu University since the 1960s.

⁶⁶ The magazines published in Roman script by the Christian missions came first, then the magazines published in Bengali script. These different graphic practices are linked to locally dominant voices. See Choksi, 'Language to Script'.

⁶⁷ Carrin, *Le Parler des dieux*.

number of people are engaged in writing, printing, and disseminating various magazines and periodicals in the Santali language, both in *ol' chiki* and other scripts. These publications were provided and sold at gatherings or rallies. I have attended Santal literary festivals since the 1980s and their incidence is increasing, as Choksi noted for the cultural events he attended in Kolkata in 2009–2011. I agree with him that rather than regarding the printed artefact as a window into a unified community in the Andersonian sense, they should be seen '...as a constellation of social, linguistic, and—importantly in the case of Santali—graphic practices. These artefacts are recontextualized within networks of circulation, creating new forms of politics.'⁶⁸

Santal writers and the Sarna Dhorom movement

Still, writing did not obstruct oral expression, which was encouraged by Mundari or Santali radio programmes and by poetry recitals in the cities or in the context of theatre festivals. It became evident that Santali and other Munda languages could express an indigenous knowledge. Santal literature includes three broad periods: the first, contemporary with the early work of the missionaries, appears in Bengal from the 1880s and is written in Roman or Bengali characters. The second dates from the 1930s and from the work of Raghunath Murmu, who used mythological narratives in a new way to convey a social message while stressing the need for education. This second generation of writers, inspired by Murmu, is characterized by literary realism, and these writers are often white-collar employees of Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) in Jamshedpur, and also of the Rourkela steel plants and the Dhanbad collieries, where even skilled workers, such as Rourkela welders, produce poetry and prose. The third category of literature, which is very influential today, concerns, and is directly inspired by, labour conditions, protest, and deprivation, but is also more open to the influence of authors such as Chekhov.⁶⁹ To be brief, while the second-generation literature still expresses the political enthusiasm which marked the rise of the Jharkhand Party in the 1970s, the third generation does not place much faith in politics. The writers are often teachers who have been writing as a part-time activity until they retire. The magazines and books confer prestige on their authors but generally run at a loss.⁷⁰ Even so, their publication and distribution allow for the formation and maintenance of local political networks. As Choksi puts it: 'it is no surprise that some of the most active members of contemporary Jharkhand political groups, or other indigenous political formations, were, or had been, magazine editors, contributors, or distributors'.⁷¹ Some of these writers, organized in the Santal Writer's

⁶⁸ Choksi, 'Language to Script', p. 1521.

⁶⁹ These Santal authors often refer to the influence of Russian literature as they combine experiential knowledge with tribal memory in their short stories to describe Santal society facing modernity.

⁷⁰ The magazines are often ephemeral due to lack of finance and many writers sponsor the publication of their books, hoping to win a prize that will compensate them for their investment of time and money.

⁷¹ Choksi, 'Language to Script', p. 1538.

Association, discuss their work in their 'club' at the office of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in Jamshedpur,⁷² which faces the bookshop where their books are sold along with Santal music and films.⁷³ In the 1970s the bookshop was also a place where various political groups used to meet, and this was still the case in 2016.

The turn to literacy was vested in a religious idiom. The Sarna Dhorom movement or 'the return to the sacred grove' (*Jaher ruar calak*) which emerged in Mayurbhanj in the 1970s was founded by Guru Besnao, a disciple of Raghunath Murmu. It is a reinterpretation of the *bonga* cult but tends to focus on the benevolent *bongas*, eliminating the evil spirits associated with witchcraft. To convey his moral message Murmu now turned to a new kind of village theatre linked to the Sarna Dhorom, and both the new religion and the theatre influenced the Jharkhand movement. In the 1970s, the Sarna Dhorom gurus, too, staged village theatre while promoting *ol' chiki*, Santali language, and literature. These gurus, as well as the Santal writers, were one of the driving forces behind the Adivasi struggle within the Jharkhand movement, which led to the creation of the Jharkhand state in 2000.

The deities revered by Sarna Dhorom devotees dwell in a sacred grove called Sarna by the Munda, Dessauli by the Ho, and Jaher by the Santal. The grove is a stand of virgin forest that was left untouched when the village was founded. In the grove, we find the stones of the spirits associated with the village and with the creation myth. Present in every village, the grove has become emblematic of indigenous religion. Its deities receive sacrifices and rice-beer libations during the main agricultural rituals, while villagers sing and dance in their honour.

Through the Sarna Dhorom movement, the Santals received a new ethics from the sacred grove deities, based on egalitarian ideas and capable of opposing hierarchy and the caste system. The construction of an alternative culture through narrative, village theatre, and other cultural expressions had become part of the subtle process of reinvention of tradition. The social critique produced by Santal writers is not confined to the literate, since dramas are often staged. Inspired by day-to-day struggles, the plots describe employment in illegal mines, prostitution, forced migration, weakening of family ties, and destruction of the environment.

The forest in the Santal imaginary

The forest is central to the Santal imaginary. The Santal ancestors merged into the landscape and 'engaged' in the world as hunters,⁷⁴ but also created a form

⁷² The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Jharkhand Liberation Front), founded in November 1972, is a political party in the state of Jharkhand which was founded by Binod Bihari Mahto.

⁷³ M. Carrin, 'Jharkhand, Alternative Citizenship in an Adivasi State', in *The Modern Anthropology of India*, (eds) P. Berger and F. Heidemann (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 185–198. Also M. Carrin, 'Performing Indigeneity on a Sacred Hill, Logo Buru', *Anglistica*, Vol. 19, no. 1, 2015, pp. 37–50: Special issue: Out of Hidden India: Adivasi Histories, Stories, Visualities, and Performances, (eds) R. Ciocca and Sanjukta Das Gupta.

⁷⁴ For the concept of engagement, see T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment. Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

of sociality: 'The ancestors collected plants and debated the "custom" (*colon*)', distributing vegetal and animal terms to name the clans. Among all the Munda groups, the ancestors have come upon the totem when on their way to the hunt.⁷⁵ The natural species which feature in clan names are equally recurrent in taxonomies, which are now fragmented but still represent a way to hierarchize knowledge.

The Santals classify forests as those spaces with big trees and bushes as well as those with small trees and shrubs. Trees have various uses—for food (bark and fruits), for building houses, making implements, or as medicine—and some plants are good for slaking thirst, stopping blood flow, or soothing burns, which permits their identification. The main categories of vegetal classification are trees (*dare*), leaves (*sakam*), and roots (*rehet*). According to Santal villagers, water is the most important element for a plant's survival. The bark (*chal*) of a tree represents the skin that keeps the water in place; without bark, trees die for lack of water (although this may also be due to the wrath of a *bonga*).⁷⁶ In some myths, trees die because of human transgressions,⁷⁷ and men, in despair, try to regenerate the half-burnt trees.⁷⁸

The Santals continue to imagine their existence as linked to the flora around them. The relationship with a plant or an animal is often expressed by contiguity, as when the ancestors, stopping in the bush, hold a deer in their arms or pluck a creeper. Plants are also used as metaphors to describe ceremonial friendship. The expression 'branch of sal' (*sarjom dar*)⁷⁹ or 'karam branch' (*karam dar*)⁸⁰ is used for ceremonial friendship between women, while men talk of 'flower friends' (*baha gatic*). One has recourse to plants to make a promise stick: thus, one may engage with the deities by wrapping a poultry feather in *sal* leaves, which implies the promise to sacrifice a chicken (*sim agom*) later. Further, trees are thought to have similar properties to humans, such as a life and soul.

The semantic patterning which translates this intimacy into words is sustained by ritual practices, such as the annual hunt or pilgrimage to sacred sites. These confer a new meaning on the damaged landscape, evoking collective memories and—more importantly—peoples' experience of their own daily lives. This continuity between landscape and people counters the ruptures observed at the level of taxonomies which are no longer shared,⁸¹ and only survive precariously as the toolbox of Santal healers (*ojhas*).

⁷⁵ The ancestors of the San sub-clan are supposed to have found the plant of this name while the hunt was under way and they decided to cook it for food. The ancestors then developed sores in their mouths, an incident which founded the totemic taboo.

⁷⁶ When the Santals have no modern tools to fell a tree, they use another technique which involves the removal of a ring of bark at the base of the tree.

⁷⁷ See Carrin, *Le Parler des dieux*, Chapter V.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 270–274.

⁷⁹ *Sarjom* or *Sal* (*Shorea Robusta*, L.).

⁸⁰ *Karam* (*Adina Cordifolia*, L.).

⁸¹ We find approximately 500 medicinal plants in the lists in the archives, which also include a short treatise describing the main illnesses and their symptoms, as well as the pharmacopeia. See Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine*.

Santal healers developed an intimacy with plants and animals, as they had to 'awaken' (*jagaron*) the curative power of plants by *mantras*. They must distinguish between *bisi jarebuti* (poisonous plants) and *jomea jarebuti* (edible plants), while ordinary people are more interested in the non-poisonous varieties. Today, most Santals mainly know about plants with high utilitarian value, for medicinal use or consumption, or wood for household use.

For laymen, maintaining a sense of continuity and intimacy with non-humans helps to compensate for the loss of knowledge. Even today, metaphors express the continuity between humans and other living beings since the Santals associate anthropomorphic components with the classification of the flora. Plants appear in numerous metaphors concerning the human body; thus the leaves (*arak*) stand for the ear (*lutur*) or the female organ, while the male organ is likened to a mushroom.

The sacred grove as the forest in the village

The sacred grove (Jaher) is a landmark in Adivasi memory. The archive texts describe how to establish a sacred grove, observing various kinds of omens to decide if the cluster of sal trees chosen for the grove is suitable.⁸² The dedication involved the village priest (*naeke*) as well as the chief (*manjhi*) and the elders from the different clans, who had to ritually install the stones of the Jaher *bongas*. This ritual is still performed when a group of villagers decides to found another hamlet (*tola*) or wants a separate place of worship. The foundation of a new grove engages the villagers to worship the Jaher deities, those of the creation myth. Further, the new Jaher creates a link between different kinds of place: the forest where the Santals still go for hunting and the hill deities (*buru bongas*) who receive offerings in rain-making rituals (*da gama*). The Jaher represents the forest in the village, reminding the villagers of a time when they were hunters and gatherers. Moreover, the Jaher represents a 'giving environment'.⁸³

Each grove comprises a wide range of ecological diversity. It is forbidden to cut trees from a Jaher, seen as the abode of the village deities. Even dead branches should not be used, and the place must be protected from any 'polluting' intrusion, such as pregnant or menstruating women.

During the last two decades, Santals, like other Adivasis, have fashioned sacred groves (Disom Jaher) in towns, allowing migrants to worship the tribal deities in industrial cities. These groves serve, at times, as political arenas. Santal politicians make donations to them, but there are also non-Santal donors, which shows that the Santal have succeeded in forging alliances with other communities. The creation of regional sacred groves mediates between new stakeholders—the workers, the land, the local groups—and the state. In the last

⁸² Before selecting a place for a new sacred grove (Jaher) one must observe the *karmas thili* by planting a branch in the soil of the site. If the branch is still green after one day, the omen is considered favourable.

⁸³ The hill deities, for example, are seen as kin who provide for their children, the men: N. Birt-David, 'Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40, no. 51, 1999, pp. 567–591.

decade, Santals and other Mundari groups have claimed animism as their official religion, and their sacred groves are acknowledged as places of worship with the same legal status as temples.⁸⁴ This has contributed to conferring a political dimension on animism, which becomes a conscious claim. The religion of the sacred grove is linked to various ecological movements.⁸⁵

Knowledge and experience in a Hazaribagh village

I shall now turn to a particular setting to show the place of indigenous knowledge in local life. Is indigenous knowledge a habitus in Bourdieu's sense? To answer this question, I shall show how different groups (men, women and children) are conscious of sharing the knowledge of the ancestors (*hapramko bidia*). The village of Jobradaga⁸⁶ in Hazaribagh (Jharkhand) has a Santal majority. Most villagers have lost their lands and are now trying to regain some fields to cultivate vegetables. The Santals of the region used to work as casual labourers for the Hindu Mahtos, but now they try to avoid working for the Mahtos, who treat them as Untouchables. Since most of the Santals do not have enough land, men work casually in illegal mines,⁸⁷ carrying coal on bicycles to sell it to the local mafias in Ranchi.

Among different innovations, they have tried to plant new varieties of seeds and have worked hard to supply grocers in the nearby towns. Although much has gone well so far, including the sharing of labour, when they tried to market their goods in Hazaribagh town, they failed since the Mahtos were monopolizing the food market. Such experiences blur the cause-effect frame of reference, because social conflicts prevent the Santals from pursuing their goals.

This social failure made the adults more ready to talk about knowledge. The headman explained to me that ten years ago, the villagers were critical of the *ojha* healers who, they felt, were selling their knowledge and were involved in accusations of witchcraft. Today, the situation has improved greatly, as healers, on the advice of activists, have agreed to share their knowledge and give the villagers free access to some medicinal plants which are stored in the village dispensary. This initiative has contributed to the revalorization of the role of the healer in the region. The example shows how villagers share initiatives and try to imagine a model of sustainable development.

When discussing their failures, the locals said while they could gain a certain level of control of technical knowledge, 'due to corruption,⁸⁸ social knowledge does not work', and 'we cannot learn from this experience (*priyog*). This is

⁸⁴ Carrin, *Le Parler des dieux*.

⁸⁵ Carrin, 'Performing Indigeneity on a Sacred Hill'.

⁸⁶ The name has been changed. The village has benefitted from the work of a Catholic NGO during the last 20 years, and the villagers have engaged in irrigation works and other agricultural improvements

⁸⁷ On the problem of illegal mines, see A. S. George 'The Paradox of Mining and Development', in *Legal Grounds*, (ed.) N. Sundar (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 158–188.

⁸⁸ This refers to the corruption that locals experience: see S. Corbridge, S. Jewitt and S. Kumar (eds), *Jharkhand: Environment, Development, Ethnicity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 17–54; Alpa Shah, 'Keeping the State Away. Democracy, Politics and the State in India's Jharkhand', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s), Vol. 13, no. 1, 2008, pp. 129–145.

why ancestor knowledge is the true one.’ What is important is the capacity for vision (*nelnel*) that enables some priests to foretell the future. Many Santals feel that educated people lose this power when they live in town and distance themselves from nature. Indigenous knowledge is thus experienced as a bundle of emotions (*rasa*) that is influenced by the seasons and by the memories of places, even if it does not exclude ‘some thinking’. Indigenous knowledge is experienced as a habitus for the user who is not always conscious of this collective heritage

Knowledge and the gender dilemma

A Santal myth tells us that women listened to Maran Buru—the chief of the *bon-gas* and creator of the world—as he taught the art of healing to men. The women witnessed the scene in secret, and the knowledge stolen by them came to be described as witchcraft.⁸⁹ The myth alludes to the idea that women cannot retain or control any knowledge without supernatural help. The patrilineal ideology exposes women to taboos since they are not allowed to use a plough, an axe, or a bow. Some of these taboos exclude them from ritual life: they are not allowed to watch the killing of sacrificial animals and are not supposed to eat the necks or backs of the sacrifice. Women are generally not allowed to become priests or chiefs, though exceptions have been known. Finally, women should not be possessed (*rumok*) by the *bongas*, nor by the Hindu goddesses, a taboo that is sometimes transgressed since some women receive a call from the Goddess Kāli, found a shrine, and enter a kind of religious career.⁹⁰

Women who collect forest produce seem to better at it than men, since they can sell their produce directly in tribal markets. Men try to understand global society, from which they feel excluded, and hope to overcome these difficulties by a rational strategy. But often corruption and bureaucracy blur that rationality, which does not work in a context of dispossession and impoverishment. In the example of Jobradaga, we see that failure is not due to a withdrawal to traditional values, rather that indigenous knowledge comes up against unpredictable factors. These failures show the difficulty subalterns face as autonomous actors when they are obliged to struggle against market forces and dominant hegemony.

Women, on the other hand, who must observe numerous taboos, know perfectly well that they cannot acquire certain skills. But they have learnt to control indigenous knowledge and to present themselves as protectors of the family in village councils. Santal women who are active in local politics and Joint Forest Management tend to develop a feminine solidarity rather than compete with men: they prefer to shape their own sphere of action, which they can control.⁹¹ Knowledge is gendered, which contributes to mute

⁸⁹ M. Carrin, *La fleur et l'os: symbolisme et rituel chez les Santal* (Paris: EHESS, 1986).

⁹⁰ M. Carrin, *Enfants de la Déesse, Dévotion et prêtrise féminine au Bengale* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS et Maison des Sciences de l'Homme 1997); English translation: *Children of the Goddess* (Delhi: Primus, 2018).

⁹¹ It is likely that Santal women have their separate wings in student unions, as well as in village gatherings, because of the coercive attitude of male-dominated parties such as the Jharkhand Party.

Adivasi women, but there is a tendency now to overcome this and express their collective engagement in the moral economy of social justice.

Women try to counter global warming by staging new forms of ritual dedicated to the female guardian of the sacred grove, Jaher Era. They pour water at the feet of the trees of the sacred grove, while they are possessed by the deities of the grove. This ritual is contested by men, who gather separately to perform their Sarna Dhorom rituals linked to the cult of the *ol' chiki* script. For them, the denial of women's ritual initiatives is coherent with Santal ideology which excludes women from learning. Men want to control the return to the sacred sites, as they have a cultural claim over hunting when it is banned.

In some contexts, women try to suppress their knowledge, to avoid male suspicion and accusations of witchcraft. Transfer of knowledge between men and women is difficult since the sexes work in autonomous spheres, while men prefer women to remain dependent on their authority.

Traditional gender inequality involves property rights and political participation among Santals and other Adivasis.⁹² Land is highly valued, as it reinforces a sense of belonging through kinship and a sense of personhood. That is why transfer of land—especially from men to women—often creates conflicts which may result in accusations of witchcraft.⁹³

In this perspective, the suspicion of witchcraft stems from the impossibility of managing equity. Where egalitarianism informs rationality, the denial of equal sharing can only be done through violence. Despite this gender asymmetry, there are contexts where Santal villagers are capable of economic initiatives, like the sponsoring of a private school in the village.⁹⁴

Indigenous knowledge is not only relevant to the way people analyse their own world. It is also pivotal to the interaction between worlds: the village, the city, and the transnational trajectory of indigeneity. As de la Cadena and Starn point out,⁹⁵ indigenous people have become more visible in the public domain, forging a vision which integrates environmental engagement and indigenous reinvented religions.

The re-enchantment of the landscape as heritage

In rural areas, the Santals' perception of the environment has a direct bearing on daily life and knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation. Environmental knowledge has certainly decreased, but then the forest, too, has become degraded. Santals who work in cities still keep in touch with

⁹² G. Kelkar and D. Nathan, *Gender and Tribe: Women, Land and Forest in Jharkhand* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991).

⁹³ The degradation of widows' rights has led Santal women to pressure *panchayats* or communities to negotiate their access to land. As such claims affect the material interests of the male agnates in a context of scarcity, it becomes difficult for women to succeed in asserting their claims: Nitya Rao, *Good Women Do Not Inherit Land: Politics of Land and Gender in India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press and Orient Blackswan, 2008), pp. 306–307.

⁹⁴ This experience was intended to compensate for the absenteeism of teachers in the village, and has been possible with the help of donors and the support of a local NGO.

⁹⁵ de la Cadena and Starn, *Indigenous Experience Today*.

their families in rural areas and return periodically to the 'village' where they may even own land that their kin cultivate in their name.

Every year, Adivasis gather to perform rain-making rituals (*da gama*) on the top of the hills. Such rituals mark the mountains as sacred sites, an important point when Santals want to show that the place belongs to them. It is quite comprehensible, therefore, that hills have become emblems of indigeneity. The Rajmahal Hills have recently been defended by Adivasis who claim to be the guardians of their fauna, flora, and fossils against Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leaders protecting the interests of mining companies.⁹⁶ The latter have tried to silence some of the female leaders of the movement, which has taken the form of an eco-nationalism.⁹⁷

The Chotanagpur landscape has been appropriated through songs, narratives, and political slogans, making it a complex heritage scape. It is marked by its social and historical constructions, by the tribal rebellions, by the works of the colonial period, and by the activities of the multinational companies. The re-enchantment of the landscape has been marked by the re-sacralization of sacred groves, which have acquired a new meaning, involving Adivasi politicians who also demand Adivasi participation in development. The sacralization of the landscape by Adivasi communities is crucial for understanding how they have become the guardians of nature, and how this ethos came to guide an emotional relationship to the landscape.

Today, pilgrimage to sacred sites still allows the Santal and other Mundari groups to articulate a broad range of connections—political, social, economic, and cultural. The Logo Buru pilgrimage is one of these festive events which attracts Santals annually from different states to Jharkhand.

This festival has both a cultural and a political meaning. It is linked to Jharkhand state through the presence of the tribal leaders. Officials, writers, and intellectuals watch the sunset from the cave of Logo Buru, which stands in for the Harata cave, a mythical place where Santal ancestors are said to have stayed for seven years. The pilgrims peep into the empty cave to contemplate Cae Champa, the mythical Santal kingdom. The pilgrimage represents a conscious attempt to perform a ritual—the climbing of the Logo Buru hill—to renew the link with a sacred hill considered to be part of Adivasi heritage, and it works to revive the sense of belonging to a sacred landscape, seen as a 'pristine place', and to experience the sense of loss (*hirin*). Here, the contemplation of loss becomes an act of representation. It is important to erase alternative versions of the past, except the true one captured by the imagery of the empty cave. During discussions with Santal intellectuals, I understood that the emphasis on loss was not intended to produce cultural amnesia, but rather a consciousness of something more important—'the need to be together in a pristine place'. The event, organized by Santal writers, aims at bestowing on participants a new authenticity which legitimates the politics of representation, for the pilgrimage also makes Adivasi culture visible.

⁹⁶ The movement, called 'Save the Rajmahal Hills', started in 2002.

⁹⁷ G. Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

More globally, the ritualization of the landscape allows Adivasis to rediscover a holistic imagery where the pristine place of pilgrimage represents an aperture to the past, one which cannot otherwise be imagined.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Cosmological traditions provide Santals with a way to understand major aspects of the world, ways to think and feel about it, and ways to act on it. By creating the Santal script, Raghunath Murmu was able to rewrite the traditions, since the script allowed Santals to imagine a single cultural community across state borders. As literary production developed, it became embedded in various literary and political networks. The Sarna Dhorom movement enabled the Santals to reveal a new Adivasi ethics, based on egalitarian ideas, capable of opposing hierarchy and the caste system, though it became evident that the pursuit of truth, which had haunted Murmu, was becoming absorbed in a constellation of competing ideologies. However, the reframing of Adivasi knowledge has aided the Santals in their struggle against the decline of environmental knowledge caused by industrialization and the degradation of the forest. Later, Santal and Mundari intellectuals have projected their identity onto the landscape, both as part of memory work and as actors engaged in environmental struggle, opposing the mining companies in Jharkhand.

Reinvesting in their sacred sites, the Santals are developing a form of reinvented knowledge which integrates the mythical heritage and the semantic continuities that Adivasis experience between men, plants, and animals.

Indigenous knowledge is changing, constantly produced and reproduced, discovered as well as lost, even though it is often represented as static. It is shared to a much greater degree than other forms of knowledge, but its distribution is still socially differentiated. Specialists may exist by virtue of ritual or political authority.

The reinvented Adivasi culture has been wrought as an answer to the threat to the tribe-nature relationship. Adivasis share continuities with nature through their indigenous knowledge but have not been able to gain control over natural resources or promote models of sustainable development informed by justice and equity. Still, indigenous knowledge, internalized like a habitus, pervades the Adivasi world as an implicit relation where a human ecology and aesthetic define a way of life and a natural philosophy. Indigenous knowledge today stands as a cosmic vision inspired by literacy, to oppose dispossession and loss. Thus the ethnic affirmations and the ecological activism of the Adivasi elites are intrinsically linked to the economic and political crisis that strikes Adivasi communities.

Competing interests. None.

⁹⁸ Carrin, 'Performing Indigeneity on a Sacred Hill'.

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