

Part I

Introduction

A Crisis of Reproduction

Gender, Land and Migration in Contemporary Jharkhand

This book collates papers I have written over the past twenty-five years based on intensive long-term engagement with the *adivasi* (mainly Santal) population of the Santal Parganas region of Jharkhand state. The main arguments presented in this book, while located within particular historical and political moments in the region, have global relevance across multiple disciplines, like development and gender studies and explorations of indigeneity and ecological change. The chapters in this book contribute to the production of knowledge in three broad areas.

First, they contribute to an improved understanding of gender as contextual, relational and dynamic, moving beyond the socially constructed roles and relationships between men and women. Such an understanding generates the need for reflexive methodologies that provide possibilities for studying relationships across space, time and institutional settings. Second, they seek to deepen our understanding of *adivasi* societies in relation to their ecological environment, especially their conceptualizations of land and labour, and how these ideologies feed into shaping unequal power relationships amongst themselves and with other groups. Third, they help us realise the importance of locating these dynamic relationships, whether at the level of the household or the community, and the interlocking of personal or individual, community and ecological needs and aspirations, within the changing political and economic context.

On 2 August 2000, the parliament approved the Bill for the reorganisation of Jharkhand as a separate state. Much has been written about the politics and governance of the newly established Jharkhand state and the continuities and changes in livelihoods. But analyses of gender roles and relations, and

how these are affected by resource relations, livelihood transitions and the new narratives of citizenship, are missing from the discourse. This provided me the space to focus on the opportunities and the contradictions that have emerged in the new state, as aspirations of the state and its *adivasi* populations diverge – the former focusing on capitalist growth and the latter on the control over natural resources.

Methodologically, my approach combines historical and ethnographic methods from a feminist epistemological lens. I combine early insights on gender, indigeneity and ecology from colonial archival records like the land revenue settlement records of the early twentieth century with life history narratives from the post-independence years to the present. The land records largely exclude women in line with colonial constructions of the man as the ‘head of household’. I triangulate and challenge such narratives through ethnographic fieldwork, focusing particularly on the perspectives of Santal women on their own life-course transitions, combined with a study of court records, interviews with village leaders, lawyers, politicians, missionaries and civil society activists (see Chapter 2).

The chapters reflect a temporality of my own research over the past two decades. As the political, economic and social contexts changed, so did women’s experiences and the choices and crises they confronted. Sheila, a teenager when I first met her in a remote, hilly village of the district, eloped with Prakash, a mason working on the road being constructed nearby. She sought love, security and a better life in the plains. Confronted, however, with drunkenness and violence, hard work remained central to her existence. She negotiated with Prakash to move from the village to the district headquarters, Dumka, where she found work as a cook in a government school. She also started gardening on a plot of land near their home, using her farming skills and intelligence to support her children and reproduce her household. Chronology here is critical for telling the story of gendered change and the workings of power and agency over time.

My broader quest for gender and wider social equality and justice, emerging from my involvement with communities, especially women amongst them, their everyday lives and well-being, as a researcher, advocate and friend over the past three decades has shaped the scope and structure of the book. A deep understanding of the mutual relationships between land and labour – the primary means of production – analysing them within a relational framework, rather than as discrete themes, has contributed to the evolution of my own personal, intellectual and methodological journey. While

the Santals are the largest *adivasi* group in Jharkhand today, they are by no means the majority, even in the Santal Parganas. My primary focus in this book, however, remains the experiences of the Santals, and their strategies for survival and securing a life of dignity, as this provides an opportunity to examine in depth how gender and ethnicity play out in the lives of people.

Taking this explicit position helps bring to the fore the mechanisms, both material and symbolic, through which a range of unequal power relations operate – between individual women and men, the *adivasis* and non-*adivasis*, and institutions of the state and civil society. While individuals may invest in their lives, strive for justice and struggle to move out of material poverty, existing institutional systems, operating at multiple scales, may often fail to provide them access to valuable skills and basic productive resources. Structural inequalities then pose a barrier to mobility (see Chapter 7). Unpacking the role of macro-policies and the political context in shaping opportunities and choices helped me contextualise these very local insights within a wider global context. Further, each of these groups and scales is heterogenous and internally divided – hence generalised assumptions are unable to identify the sticky points that inhibit equality. It is these interfaces and nuances which this book highlights.

In this introductory chapter, I set out the broad contours of my journey, starting in 1994, its underlying philosophies and conceptual underpinnings. During this period, Jharkhand has not just become a separate state, but has also made great strides in development indicators, including literacy rates and the expansion of basic infrastructure (see Chapter 14). My own positionality, too, has changed from being an activist and development practitioner to a full-time academic. I draw on anecdotes to reflect on my journey, pointing at the same time to key social and political changes that Jharkhand has witnessed over this period.

I then turn to a brief discussion of four critical changes which inform the organisation of the book: (a) the sharpening of ethnic, class and gender divides, (b) the nexus between land, labour and migration, (c) the rise in modern education and its implications for both changing aspirations and highlighting contradictions, including those of gender, and (d) the double bind of state policies, especially those relating to land, water, agriculture and food security, as spaces for the simultaneous practice of equality and subordination. The focus on mining, for instance, while generating incomes, can threaten food security and sustainability in the medium to longer term. Collectively, these shifts point to a growing crisis of social reproduction, a key

concept underpinning the book. Apart from limiting material improvements, this crisis of social reproduction has enhanced conflict across institutions, from the household to the state, with implications for gender justice. I draw on Fraser (1989) to frame gender justice as marking the intersection of socio-cultural (recognition), economic (redistribution) and political (representation) rights, grounded in the everyday lives and struggles of Santal women.

My Personal Journey

My first encounter with Santal women was in 1994 through a women's empowerment project run by a feminist non-governmental organisation (NGO). A training programme had been scheduled in Jarmundi block of Dumka district, then still a district of Bihar state, but the 'trainer' from the capital city, Patna, failed to turn up. The place was seen as too 'remote, backward and unsafe' for an educated woman from Bihar. Along with the head of the NGO, I conducted the training, but became acutely aware of the inequality and sense of difference, even amongst women of the same state. Clearly ethnicity mattered, as did education. I was confronted with stereotypes of the 'simple Santal woman', hard-working, exploited sexually, a voiceless victim subject to all sorts of crimes including witch-hunting. She was denied agency by NGOs and the state, as a strategy for raising donor funding for her 'empowerment'. This kind of representation, of *adivasi* exploitation at the hands of external settlers and contractors, and their 'victimhood', gave strength to the discourse of 'internal colonialism' propagated by *adivasi* leaders in pushing the case for a separate state of Jharkhand (Munda, 1988; Corbridge, 1988). In my interactions over the next few years, I found Santal women to be strong and articulate, in the face of huge odds – economic exploitation, social marginalisation and political exclusion. They wanted to be heard, but this was not always easy, as a majority of women were monolingual in Santali (Census of India, 2001). I decided therefore to conduct deeper research to explore some of the puzzles I was confronted with.

The second moment of my engagement was between 1998 and 2000, when I lived in Santal villages for an extended period of time and explored questions of power, agency and rights as part of my doctoral research (Rao, 2008). To capture the diversity of resource relationships within the community, I divided my time between two villages – one in the plains,

close to Dumka, and the second in a remote hilly forested terrain. Several questions were in my mind. Who were the Santal women killed as witches? Were they really voiceless or were they women who challenged stereotypes and, more importantly, exercised claims to land and property? Did the law support the claims of these women? Or, in the absence of state support, did they negotiate and perhaps compromise with community-level, traditional institutions in order to secure their livelihoods? What was driving resistance to women's land claims, despite notions of relative gender equality within *adivasi* communities like the Santals? How was the larger political economy shaping the construction of *adivasi* identity on the eve of the formation of Jharkhand as a separate state?

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies formed the first government of Jharkhand in November 2000, rather than the coalition of political parties that had fought for statehood under the umbrella of the Jharkhand movement. The *Vision 2010* document, launched in February 2003, outlined some of the policy directions and emphases of the new state. These included commercialisation, export orientation and market development, both in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Dealing with food insecurity, inequities in resource distribution and control, and destitution did not appear as priorities (see Chapter 11). One of the first steps taken by the new government was to set up an all-party committee to review the existing land legislation and suggest amendments, as the non-transferability of land (Section 20 of the Santal Pargana Tenancy Act [SPTA], 1949) was seen as a major obstacle to economic growth and development. A Santal headman in one of the villages I visited in 2004 said:

The Chief Minister of Jharkhand [from 2000–03] has the body of an *adivasi*, but the head and mind of a Marwari [a trading group]. He does not care about our land and is trying to give it to big industries. Buses have been given to cooperatives of ten tribal youth. But their school certificates have been retained, so they cannot apply for any other job, probably till such time as the loan component (70,000 rupees) is repaid, if ever. Second, schools have been built, but new teachers have not been appointed, and the existing teachers are overloaded with other work – hence hardly any teaching takes place. On top of that, liquor sales have been legalised. The policy seems to be to keep the *adivasis* drunk and uneducated.

My next phase of fieldwork in the Santal Parganas was between 2003–06. The priorities of the state and the *adivasis* had already begun to diverge: to the latter land was more than a productive resource; it was a key element of their social and cultural identity, giving them public visibility, bargaining power and enhanced status. In fact, *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forests, land) was the foundation of their struggle for a separate state, with the recent Pathalgadi movement adding two more dimensions – *jan* (people) and *janwar* (animal) (Xaxa, 2019). For the government, however, land (both private and common property) was now a commodity that could be used to achieve economic growth through private sector investments. In such a context of uncertainty, women's rights to land were no longer a priority (See Chapter 13).

In 2006, while walking to the remote village where I was staying, a policeman, the head of the local *thana* (police station), accosted me. He was visiting the village to talk to the *parganait* (leader of a group of villages) about the tense situation in the area. There were press reports on the growing activities of Maoist (left-wing extremist) groups in the region, which, he said, were led by 'civil elements from outside'. Training in the use of firearms was being organised, and an atmosphere of violence prevailed in this otherwise peaceful region. I soon realised that he was talking about the neighbouring *panchayat* (elected village council) of Pachwara in Pakur district, which was witnessing strong resistance to a coal mining project. I was told that compensation had been paid out in cash and the resistance broken. Work was in full swing on the project, and it was 'only a few people with vested interests who were creating problems, and they would be arrested at the earliest'. One of these ostensible 'troublemakers', a Catholic nun, earlier the principal of a missionary girls' school in the area, was sadly killed in 2011 (*Matters India*, 2015). He gave me a 'lift to the village' in his police jeep, checking out my credentials as we drove.

This brief encounter raised several troubling issues: How had the state managed to acquire land and get an agreement on cash compensation from the local *adivasi* people? Was any dialogue ever held or was this agreement one-sided? Was this solution not in contradiction to the existing protective land policies, including SPTA? And was it not a gross violation of the Supreme Court's Samatha judgment of 1997 that prioritised the decision of the local village *panchayats* on issues of land use? On a more personal note, this was the first time in over a decade of my visiting the Santal Parganas that I sensed fear and insecurity and a lack of trust – a breaking down of the sense

of community. The bogey of Maoist violence meant that people were afraid to help each other, unsure of the consequences.

My next visit was after nearly a decade, in 2015. This was a personal visit to meet my Santal friends, women and men, who had welcomed me into their homes and who continue to inspire my academic journey. In the plains' village, the Santal teacher with whom I had stayed between 1999–2000 was now the *sarpanch* (elected head of the village council) and had worked hard to implement the development programmes allocated to the *panchayat*, claiming rights wherever possible. She had streamlined the public distribution system (PDS), ensuring food security, as well as other public works programmes (Figure 1.1). This seemed like a big step forward.

In the forest village, however, my experience was depressing. The road had broken down, and while school buildings existed, there were hardly a handful of children present. The health centre was locked up. The area was officially under 'Maoist control'. Some of the little boys who had stayed with me, now in their twenties, were missing from the village. Rumours had it that they



Figure 1.1 The woman *sarpanch* showing her accomplishments

Source: Photograph by the author.

were in jail, seen as threats to local peace and security. Several young people asked me why the only work available to them, provided by the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), 2005 – the largest social protection scheme in the world – was manual and unskilled? With some education and no jobs, they were frustrated, challenging the development trajectory and the nature of opportunities available to them (see Chapter 7). Older men, like the village leader with whom I had stayed, had now started migrating to Delhi to work in factories, a sign of sheer desperation for survival. The breakdown of the social fabric appeared to have worsened – from cultivators, with pride in their land, a majority of Santals had been converted into ‘footloose labour’ (Breman, 1996).

In 2016, the Jharkhand government, led for the first time by a non-*adivasi*, to hasten the process of acquiring agricultural land for non-agricultural, so called ‘developmental’ purposes, tried to amend the SPTA by stealth (see Chapter 14). There was an explicit emphasis on a modernist, neo-liberal growth model, with little attention to culture, identity or social structure. In Polanyi’s (2001 [1944]) terms, the modern market economy, which seeks to commodify land, labour and money, and transform people’s economic mentalities from one of reciprocity and redistribution to utility maximisation and growth, is untenable in the long run, as the economy is ultimately embedded in social relations. People’s behaviour is informed not just by the satisfaction of material wants but also notions of social recognition and status. The move towards economic liberalism over the last two decades, following the creation of Jharkhand state, has led to a growing alienation from land, a loss of status and recognition, and increasing social inequalities, all contributing to the rise in violent opposition.

My last encounter is one of hope. In February 2020, just prior to the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I visited the Santal Parganas for initiating an action research project with youth and women’s groups on the theme of sustainable food systems. This experience led me towards a closer engagement with participatory action research methodologies in my praxis, entailing reflection on enduring and emergent issues, challenges and aspirations of local communities and informing action for transformation and change (see Chapter 14). The shift in methodology also reflects a shift from an impersonal to a more personal approach, one that is ‘political’ in recognising our shared interests and aspirations. Overcoming the social distance between the Santal women and myself, the researched and the researcher, has contributed to building an inclusive analytical framework,

enabling the exploration of critical points when change happens, and the mechanisms through which research becomes relevant to the local context.

In the 2019 state elections, Hemant Soren of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), a Santal, was elected to the post of Chief Minister. His father, Shibu Soren, had been the face of the Jharkhand movement, leading the fight for social justice and against land alienation in the 1960s and the 1970s (Rao, 2008). While reversing trends may not be easy, his government appears mindful of *adivasi* interests, seeking to create inclusive institutions and equitable policies that can restore their dignity and enable communities to have some say over their local environments. Providing a democratic space for articulation and contestation of needs and priorities is perhaps the only way out of the impasse created by a combination of socially exclusive development, migration for securing livelihoods and anti-state violence. I reflect further on the future in the final chapter of this book but now turn to a discussion of the key themes reflecting a crisis of reproduction.

What Underlies the Crisis of Reproduction?

From Friedrich Engel's (1972 [1884]) observation about the confinement of women to the domestic domain and the devaluation of the 'domestic' to the 'productive' as societies settled and became dependent on market exchange to the present, there has been a lot of debate around the production–reproduction divide and its implications for gender equality. The 1970s and the 1980s witnessed the 'domestic labour' debate, which led to feminist demands for the valuation of domestic work and providing notional 'wages for housework'. They sought to ensure women's autonomy not by redistributing 'unpaid domestic and care work', as suggested by the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, but by emphasising 'difference' and seeking recognition for domestic work as a legitimate economic activity (Federici, 1975).

This debate made it imperative to analytically distinguish between the various dimensions of reproduction – biological, daily household maintenance and social reproduction – though all inter-related (Edholm, Harris and Young, 1978). Social reproduction covers not just everyday tasks and activities necessary to reproduce households and families, but also the realm of care and reproduction of society more broadly, its social institutions, culture and the productive economy (Locke, Seeley and Rao, 2013), spanning both human and environmental dimensions. Social reproduction includes but goes beyond