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Spirits, State Effects and Peoples' Politics:  
Negotiating Sovereignty in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kanker, Central India

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Spirits, State Effects and Peoples' Politics:  
Negotiating Sovereignty in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kanker, Central India

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M.Phil., Delhi University, 1998

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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
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## Abstract

### Spirits, State Effects and Peoples' Politics: Negotiating Sovereignty in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Kanker, Central India By Aditya Pratap Deo

Most histories of tribal peoples, even if they conceive of their subjects as agents in the making of their histories, do so in terms determined by the rationalist protocols of modernity in which the tribal life-world is considered archaic and before the time of history. The life-expressions of tribal peoples are relegated to the domain of culture/religion separated from the political, worthy of mention as curio but incapable of providing the terms on which a history can be rendered.

This study begins with a recognition of the trans-temporality of our world – both that of modern, urban intellectuals, and of “tribal” peasants – to fashion a historical narrative from evidence of self-presentations by tribal peoples that, though informed by history, exceed its rationalist strictures. It does so by exploring present-day popular constructions of the polity of colonial-princely Kanker in central India that appear in the oral accounts of the past given in the practices of the ancestral deity of the Gond peoples of Kanker, the *anga dev*.

When we make *anga dev* practices, and accounts, a central ground of investigation, a radically different understanding of tribal peoples, power and polity comes into view. The dominant narratives of “tribal” history in the colonial period construct a story of victimhood or heroic resistance in which tribal peoples are either passive recipients of, or reactive to, a pre-determined polity, closed off in the domain of the state. In the popular accounts, by contrast, the mixed tribe-caste *anga dev* communities appear centrally implicated in the making of the polity. These accounts contain conceptions of the polity in which sovereign power and authority are imagined in ways that overflow the constraints of statist historical representation, and are contested, negotiated, divided and shared between the raja, the symbol of the colonial-princely state, and the people and their ancestral gods. The negotiated, divided nature of sovereignty can be seen clearly in the rituals of the Dasehra and *Madai* festivals, the practice of settling disputes and resolving problems with the help of deities, and the accounts of the past given in the *anga dev* communities.



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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction: The Making of the Project...	1
Chapter 2. The Historiography of the Project...	40
Chapter 3. The Archive of “State” and “Subjects”...	85
Chapter 4. The King as “I” and Other Notes on Ethnography...	132
Chapter 5. The World of the Anga Dev: A Field of Forces...	154
Chapter 6. Polity and Sovereignty in the Anga Dev Accounts...	224
Chapter 7. Conclusion...	284
8. Glossary...	301
9. Bibliography...	310

## Table of Illustrations

### Photographs

1. <i>Anga Dev</i> at the <i>Madai</i> at Kanker Palace, January 2011...	5
2. A <i>Madai</i> scene at Kanker Palace, January 2011...	6
3. Performing <i>puja</i> at the <i>Madai</i> ceremony at Kanker Palace, January 2011...	11
4. Chhattisgarh Tourism poster of the <i>Anga Dev Madai</i> , Ishanvan, January 2011...	14
5. <i>Anga Dev</i> at Kanker Palace during Dasehra, October 2011...	16
6. Axe, trumpet and metal chain form of gods, Kanker Palace, October 2011...	17
7. <i>Anga Dev</i> dancing at Kanker Palace during Dasehra, October 2011...	18
8. Poster for Manohar Netam’s conference, 2009...	27
9. An <i>Iqrarnama</i> , 1946...	119

## Maps

1. State of Chhattisgarh and district of Kanker...79
2. Kanker District...80
3. The Politico-Sacred Geography of Kanker...228

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Making of the Project

This dissertation is an attempt to study present-day popular constructions of the polity of princely Kanker in central India. These popular constructions appear in oral accounts of the past that inhere in the practices of the pre-eminent ancestral deity, *anga dev*, of the Gond<sup>1</sup> peoples of Kanker. The territories of the former princely state of Kanker comprised the larger part of the present district of Kanker in the southern part of the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh.<sup>2</sup> In these popular constructions of the polity, I intend to explore conceptions of the relationship between rulers and people, and the nature of sovereignty. Through this study I hope to engage with the larger debates about state formation and “tribal”<sup>3</sup> peoples in the princely states and colonial India, and about history practice and the archive; and speak to the present-day political marginalization of peoples described as “tribal.”

In the practice of history, those described as “tribes” form a “primitive” stage of time, which is conceived of as universally “secular,” “rational” and linear, of which modernity is the other, aspirational end. In this conception, the political life of tribal peoples, constructed as either innocent of or reactive to the properly “political,” is a gift

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the peoples of the Scheduled Tribes in the Kanker district, who also comprise more than half its population, have been described as “Gonds” in official classification. See *Census of India 2011, Kanker District Profile*, [http://censusindia.gov.in/Dist\\_File/datasheet-2214.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Dist_File/datasheet-2214.pdf) (accessed January 19, 2013). My study concerns mainly the larger, northern part of the Kanker district which comprised the territory of the princely state of Kanker and not the areas to the south that were part of the princely state of Bastar.

<sup>2</sup> The present district of Kanker comprises some parts of the former princely state of Bastar as well and is referred to in its full official designation as North Bastar-Kanker. See Maps 1 and 2 on pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms “tribe,” “tribal” and “tribal peoples” in the context of the official classification of “Scheduled Tribes.” As will become evident, I fundamentally question this problematic set of usages.

to them by those who are “modern.” Histories of tribal peoples, even if they conceive of their subjects as agents in the making of their histories, do so on terms determined by the rationalist protocols of modernity in which the tribal life-world is considered archaic and before the time of history. The life-expressions of tribal peoples, like the *anga dev* practices and accounts, are relegated to the domain of “culture” separated from the “political,” worthy of mention as curio but incapable of providing the terms on which a history can be rendered.

We know that the idea of the “primitive” in historical time, both in the West and its colonies, was a strategy to suppress, dominate and manage those who were politically oppositional to the modern; and provided the point against which modernity, politics and history themselves could be defined.<sup>4</sup> If that is so, the terms tribe/primitive represent the de-politicization of that which is to begin with politically radical in relation to the modern. I attempt a reading of the accounts of the past given in the *anga dev* practices as legitimate modes of apprehending the past, and therefore, as political statements; and to explore the conceptions of polity contained in them. In attempting a political reading of the *anga dev* accounts, I provide a view of the popular terms on which the political is understood and articulated. The *anga dev* accounts are hybrid: they are informed by historical time but go beyond it to intimate a plural temporality.<sup>5</sup> These terms, I argue, mark the limits of history and construct a contestatory view of the political in ways that challenge the terms that underlie the present-day political alienation of tribal peoples.

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<sup>4</sup> Prathama Banerjee, “Culture/politics: the curious double-bind of the Indian adivasi,” in *Subaltern Citizens: Investigations from India and the USA*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See discussion of “hybrid histories” in Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forest Frontiers and the Wilderness in Western India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

What I want to begin with is an account of my journey – *a personal story* – to this project, one that will clarify why I believe a political reading of the *anga dev* practices and accounts is possible but difficult within history, as well as provide a glimpse of the peculiar as well as critical nature of my implication in this project. This is an itinerary that I can stitch together only from hindsight and with considerable difficulty. What follows is therefore an account constructed through the haze of memory and from existential doubts and dilemmas albeit one that seeks to provide as full a personal context to this project as possible, because as will become clear in the following pages, this is critical for the project. The itinerary that I trace back is not about an inevitable, sure path to a clear destination but offers only a view of a repeatedly confused trajectory, and points to the impossibility and even undesirability of, as it were, “getting it right.” The project itself is hardly any consolation of a destination reached, but is a vantage from which other horizons beckon, other journeys are intimated. The emplotment of this itinerary is particular and selective, meant to contextualize this project, and can hardly claim to give a comprehensive account of all the things the itinerary touches upon. But this is how I have struggled to get a sense of my relationship with the project and to understand what it implies both for the project and for me. It is at best, as J. N. Mohanty says in *The Self and the Other* (2000), a “frail, always-at-risk self-gathering of a person to come to terms with one’s past, with one’s projects and tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Early Impressions**

My first memories of the *anga dev* are from my childhood experience of the annual three-day *madai* (annual fair) in the town of Kanker in the 1970s. I loved going to

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<sup>6</sup> Jitendra Nath Mohanty, *The Self and Its Other* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85.

the fair with my sister and our caretaker. Vendors of clothes, ornaments, toys, household implements, sweets and snack would set up their colorful stalls in a designated area of the town called *madai bhata* (fair ground) near Garhiya Pahar, a majestic set of hills that cradles the town around its south-western flank. There was always also a *meena bazar* in the *madai*, at the far end of *madai bhata*, just at the foot of the hill: a collecting of children's games and amusements including a magic show and a giant wheel. It was fun being part of the excitement and festivity of the *madai* and I greatly looked forward to it every year.

However there was another aspect of the *madai* that thrilled me but also made be nervous, especially because it happened right in my house, the palace of the raja of Kanker, who was my father. The *madai* began with a ceremony in which the two *anga dev* kept by our family, the brothers Bade and Chhote Pat Anga Dev, and several others from the villages in the vicinity of Kanker town, were received at the palace and propitiated (the terms used are *puja*, literally "worship" and *seva*, literally "service") by my father. Bade Pat Anga Dev was housed in the Shitala temple which had been built and endowed by my ancestors and Chhote Pat Anga Dev (henceforth Chhote Pat) was kept in the old palace in the center of the town. The *anga dev* arrived in the form of two rounded logs of wood joined in the middle by a cross-bar adorned with ornaments, and were carried on the shoulders of four men when they came to the palace. Once hoisted on the shoulders of the bearers, the *anga dev* moved at will.

The *anga dev* would assemble at the palace before the ceremony began and were accompanied by a large crowd of people (Photos 1 and 2 on the following pages). Many among the people carried tall poles decorated with flags that teetered precariously. There

were other people who were possessed by the *dev* (deified spirits and other gods), and they shook their bodies vigorously and hit themselves with sticks and metal chain as they danced to the loud and frantic rhythms of drums. Along with them came the flower-sellers with their baskets of bright yellow and orange marigold flowers: and they threw petals on the *anga dev* and people alike with abandon.



Photo 1. *Anga Dev* at the *Madai* at Kanker Palace, January 2011<sup>7</sup>

The *anga dev* would race into the palace compound and hurtle straight into the central Darbar Hall (court room) of the palace. Sometimes, one of them would throw a tantrum and stop at the outer gate some distance from the palace and my father had to send the *raj-dand* (royal scepter) to persuade the sulking *anga dev* to come to the palace for the *madai* ceremony. Once inside the palace, they stomped around with abandon. The bodies of the carriers, swaying to the beats of the drums, lurched dangerously from side

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<sup>7</sup> Rakesh Sharma took all the photographs of the madai for me. I took the rest.



to side. My mother would be at her wits end, trying to get our servants to control the *anga dev* so that they did not crash into valuable trophies and other objects with which the rooms of the palace were decorated. Most of the time the servants failed and my father had to hold the *anga dev* back by the touch of his hand, a touch that I observed was at once gentle and firm. I used to be amazed at the way in which he seemed to become part of the occasion so completely and at how the *anga dev* responded to his touch.



Photo 2. A *Madai* scene at the Kanker Palace, January 2011

Eventually, he had to shepherd them out of the palace rooms and lead them to an open area in the palace compound where the rituals of propitiation were to be conducted. The propitiation, which consisted of offering flowers, sandalwood paste, vermilion, turmeric and oil to the *anga dev*, usually took about half an hour and my father, standing in the middle of a circle of gods, almost locked in, had to attend individually to all the

gods surrounding him. Meanwhile, the drumming and dancing around this central space would reach a fever pitch, and then, suddenly, as the rituals were completed, the gods would begin to leave for *madai bhata*, where they would inaugurate the fair. My father stayed on till he had seen each of the gods off, his *raj-dand* by his side, but then he too would leave for *madai bhata* to perform the final rituals of propitiation at the site of the *madai*. The rush of gods and people in a somewhat unwieldy procession meant that all of us who were watching had to clear the path quickly and stay out of their way lest we collide with them. I would heave a sigh of relief as I saw the end of the procession exit the outer gate, and as the sound of the drums faded away in the distance.

Apart from the *madai*, the *anga dev* were not a significant presence in my life as a child. I left home to be in a boarding school in 1976 when I was six years old, and came home only for short periods, one of them being the winter holidays in December-January, when the *madai* took place. My father told me that in the past there was a similar but grander event held during the festival of Dasehra, when hundreds of *anga dev* would come to the palace but this event had lapsed over time. The royal *anga dev* were present at all important family ceremonies but in these instances they would lie quietly where they had been placed, a very different demeanor from that of the *madai*. I would often see the *pujari/gaita* (priest) of the royal *anga dev* visit our home and talk to my father.

When I accompanied my parents to the temples where these *anga dev* were housed, especially that of Chhote Pat in the old palace, some of the apprehension that I felt in the *madai* would return. The room in which the *anga dev* was housed was dark and clammy, and suffused with an overwhelming aroma of incense. The dark limbs of the god, looking even darker against the silver of his ornaments, seemed to reach out

menacingly. In all, the *anga dev* were shadowy figures to me, who would burst into the scene during the *madai* but recede from view for the rest of the year.

When I returned home for holidays now, I was acutely aware of the circumstance in which my family found itself. In 1971, the year following my birth, the Indian Parliament had statutorily abolished the title of the rulers of the princely states and the Privy Purse and other benefits<sup>8</sup> that went with them according to the terms of merger of the princely state into the Union of India in 1947-48<sup>9</sup>. This meant that my father had lost his major source of income and the official status of “ruler” which had given him numerous privileges. As for many people from erstwhile royal families, this led us to search for new incomes, status and identity, an overturning of much what our ilk had taken for granted as its right. However, I remember clearly the puzzling continuation of the use of the term “raja” for my father by most people in Kanker town and the villages, and of the many ceremonies of the raja that continued. One of these was the *madai*.

But while I was unsure about the status of my father and these ceremonies, I had developed an even greater doubt about the *anga dev*. To me they now appeared to be vestiges of primitive superstition. I remember refusing to go with my father to receive the *anga dev* and to participate in the ceremony for *madai*. I still wanted to witness the ceremony but hidden from view, my only concern now being what had long been my mother's: to prevent the rowdy *anga dev* from upsetting the arrangements of the house. At one point, I even asked my father if he actually believed that the *anga dev* moved on their own or whether their bearers propelled them. My father answered that it depended

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<sup>8</sup>*The Constitution (Twenty Sixth Amendment) Act, 1971*, [www.india.gov.in/govt/documents/amendment/amen26.htm](http://www.india.gov.in/govt/documents/amendment/amen26.htm) (accessed May 29, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Sajal Nag, Tejimala Gurung and Abhijit Choudhury, *Making the Indian Union: Merger of Princely States and Excluded Areas* (Delhi: Akansha, 2007).

on whether I believed in the *anga dev* or not. I gradually began to look at those who “believed,” including my father, as superstitious.

I saw less and less of my parental home, and the *anga dev* when I left Raipur in 1989 after completing high school to pursue a bachelor’s degree in History at Delhi’s St Stephen’s College. I lived in Delhi for the next twenty years, obtaining a B. A., M. A. and M. Phil in History from Delhi University; and finally in 1995 joining St Stephen’s College as a faculty member to teach History. Life at Delhi was far removed from that of the princely society from which I had come. I came to be deeply embarrassed by my background and was in denial of it even as there lingered an uncertain connection to it. My princely home became an awkward place for me, out of sync with modern times, but also one to which I returned periodically.

### **Being Raja**

I returned to the *anga dev* ceremony under dramatically changed circumstances and a different role in 2001. My father had passed away in the November of 2000, and I was called back as his eldest son, while I continued to maintain my teaching position in Delhi, to “succeed” to his position. It was a moment I approached with immense trepidation. My return involved my participation in ceremonies of the *anga dev* as raja instead of my father. It portended the beginning of an almost schizophrenic or at least a double life, the anxieties of which I realized had been present in my thoughts for a long time. It was a prospect that frightened me initially but whose implications have subsequently, especially in the form of this project, come to instruct and vitalize me, making me face up to the irreducible heterogeneity of identities that marks all our lives.

I could have refused to “succeed” but I didn’t. There is no simple answer to the question why I didn’t. Surely, the power that comes with being a raja, however transient and false that sense might be in present times, has its enticements. But I was also with much experience of the other world, and the reality of my life as a teacher was never too far from my mind, so that in some ways I could never be a “proper” raja, whatever that meant. Most importantly, my intellectual and ideological convictions were too integral to my sense of self, and my pride at having made a life of my own too great to allow me any permanent illusions in the drama into which I was thrown. And drama is what the *anga dev* ceremony of the *madai* seemed to me until I realized the reality of its experience, in many other ways than mine, for the peoples to whom it was not the indulgence it could be to me and in which even the pre-eminence of the raja was repeatedly called into question in ways I had scarcely imagined. Even if someone wanted to be raja, it was clear that this meant a lot of hard work, an almost incessant negotiation with forces beyond one’s control.

Finding myself among the *anga dev* in the *madai* (Photo 3 on the next page), trying hard to inherit in some miraculous way what I had seen was my father’s effortless handling of them, I realized that I was hankering after what was not possible, and might not have been possible in any case even for my father. It was impossible to “control” the *anga dev*. Standing in the Darbar Hall, trying to get a sense of all the *anga dev* running around me, I felt powerless, unsure of what would come next. When I raised my hands to touch the limbs of the *anga dev*, they pushed with great force, so that it was not my hand that came to maneuver them, but they who pulled me along. They rushed from corner to corner, searchingly, probingly. As I began to despair about getting them to some order, I

found myself swept in their embrace towards the site of the ceremony, barely managing to keep my balance and steady my feet. During the ceremony, every *anga dev* tried to move up to me to draw my attention so that it is with great difficulty that I managed to keep to the sequence that had been taught to me by the *raj-purohit* (royal priest). Those who were possessed by gods came and embraced me roughly and I could smell their breath and feel the hard tips of their metal chains.



Photo 3. Performing *puja* at the *Madai* ceremony at Kanker Palace, January 2011

By the time the *anga dev* dis-engaged with me to leave for the *madai bhata*, it seemed as if an eternity had passed. There was however more to come. I could not simply stay at home and have my home, the palace, restored to me, so that I could help clean its precinct strewn with the crushed petals of marigold or rearrange the furniture of the Darbar Hall and other parts of the house that the *anga dev* had invaded. I was taken to

*madai bhata*, the sacred site of the *madai*, where the rituals of propitiation were to be performed.

The *madai bhata*, a place of childish amusement for me, I discovered, was no ordinary place. Situated, as mentioned earlier, in the south-western part of the town, along the foot of Garhiya Pahar, or literally “fortress hill,” a majestic sequence of hills that can be seen from all points in the town, the *madai bhata* is close to Raja Para, the oldest quarter of the town where the ruins of the earliest palace and a set of temples built by Kanker’s rulers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are located. There is a path along the foot of Garhiya Pahar that connects Raja Para to *madai bhata*.

I was told by the *pujari* of the royal *anga dev* that the Garhiya Pahar oversaw the proceedings of the *madai*. It was the place of the Garhiya Dev (the god of the fortress), and hundreds of other related gods. The Garhiya Dev was the treasurer of the raja, one who kept the fortress and monitored entry and exit from the fort. It was under his watchful eyes that the *anga dev* and the raja secured (*baandhana*, literally “tied”) the *madai bhata*, consecrated it for the fair. On one side of *madai bhata* is the temple of Chhote Kankalin, a *devi* (goddess) whose powers were such that she could not be uprooted from her place, not even by the raja. It was only when the raja sent her a *sawari* (appropriate vehicle) of a white horse and sacrificed a white goat that her attendants could be summoned. In the middle of the *madai bhata*, with Garhiya Dev on one side and Chhote Kankalin on the other, is the *madai stambh* (column), installed on a square platform, the central place of the *madai* where the inaugural ceremony is performed by the raja. When I arrived at the *madai bhata*, crowds of people were thronging the area around it. The *anga dev*, standing on the platform, had created the same circle of inter-

locking bodies as in the palace, from the middle of which I had to perform the rituals. After the rituals, the *anga dev* and I had to walk through the *madai bhata* in order to secure it so that the *madai* could take place without any obstacles. In fact, it was this gathering of the *anga dev* and the raja that was the real *madai* or “marriage,” a coming together of life-forces to protect the people against other forces inimical to their life-rhythms. This *parikrama* (circumambulation) of *madai bhata*, where I was meant to walk in tandem with the procession of the *anga dev*, required me to become part of one moving, rushing body, to surrender to its dynamic.

I was left with a lot of questions in the wake of my first full *madai* experience. Was the *madai* merely a “religious” and “cultural” event as the present administration of the Kanker district characterized it? The administration declared the first day of the *madai* to be a general holiday and it provided police *bandobast* (arrangement) for the *madai* procession at the palace and at *madai bhata*. The Chhattisgarh Tourism Board advertised the *madai* in its hoardings to promote tourism in the state with a picture of *anga dev* to titillate people’s fancy for the unusual with the title “Chhattisgarh *nahin dekha to kya dekha*” (“If you haven’t seen Chhattisgarh, what have you seen,” see the Photo 4 on the next page).

Before my *madai* experience in 2001, the *madai*, both in its raja and *anga dev* components, had appeared to me to be a quaint and nostalgic ceremony of another time. Now, “caught up” as I was “in the middle of things,”<sup>10</sup> I was less certain and dismissive. Was this merely an artifact of another time, hollowed out and formal, or was something of the past that was significant for our time being performed under rules and forms I did

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<sup>10</sup> I take this expression from Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 28.



not fully comprehend? What did it mean to the people to see the raja caught up in this way?



Photo 4. Chhattisgarh Tourism poster of *Anga Dev Madai*, Ishanvan, January 2011

My questions were soon to get multiplied and reinforced. The *madai* ceremony formed one among many ceremonies connected with the *anga dev* that I was called upon, as the raja, to participate in and lead. This phenomenon was not limited to the royal *anga dev* and those from the villages in the vicinity of Kanker town. I became aware that almost all the villages in the territory of the erstwhile princely state of Kanker had their own *anga dev*, and all of them were connected to the figure of the raja in one way or another. This became clear when we had a large meeting of *siyan* (village elders)<sup>11</sup> from several hundred villages at the palace before the Dasehra (a major Hindu religious

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<sup>11</sup> The term *siyan* has two meanings: first, it refers to all the members of the village meeting or council, called *baithak*, comprising all the male heads of families, all married males becoming heads after the death of their father; and second, it is also a term used to refer to old men and women. I use the term *siyan* for the first, older *siyan* for the old among the first, and *siyan* men and women for the second category of persons,

festival, which falls usually in October<sup>12</sup>) of 2001. As mentioned earlier, the *anga dev* ceremony at Dasehra had lapsed since the early 1970s.<sup>13</sup> In the meeting the *siyan* insisted that we resume the ceremony as the *anga dev* from all the villages wanted to see the new raja. When my younger brother Surya Pratap Deo, who had associated with these villages in the time of my father, told me about this in Delhi, I was reluctant to agree out of nervousness concerning what it might entail. But he prevailed on me and I found myself once again in the midst of an *anga dev* ceremony, now a much larger and grander one.

During that Dasehra, hundreds of *anga dev* and related gods and goddesses came to the palace. Each of them was accompanied, by mutual agreement between the villages and the royal family, by a limited number of villagers. On the day of the Dasehra, the gods and their people, began arriving at the palace from the wee hours of the morning and settled down, side by side, in a large clearing that had been prepared for them in the compound (Photo 5).

There were of course the royal *anga dev* I have described earlier. Then there were the *anga dev* from the villages, some of them differently shaped from those with four limbs. A few of them were more elaborate with more than two rounded logs and crossbars, others were in the form of only one log and could be borne by one person. The other gods, some of them ancestral and some others not, were of a bewildering variety of forms: in the shape of wooden poles, metal chains, axes, spears, metal canopies, tridents,

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<sup>12</sup> Owing to the use of the lunar calendar, the date shifts a little from year to year.

<sup>13</sup> I believe that the contrasting popularity of the *madai* and the *Dasehra*, where the former is essentially a popular festival with a robust and continuous tradition and the latter is primarily a royalist one and had lapsed, bears out the historically relatively weak position of the raja in the polity of Kanker. I say more about this in chapter six.

trumpets, metal rods (Photo 6 below). These ranged from family deities to those of a phratry and groups of *barho* (12), *bawan* (52) and *chaurasi* (84) villages.



Photo 5. *Anga Dev* at Kanker Palace during Dasehra, October 2011

By late morning, the ground was filled with hundreds of gods and thousands of villagers. At one end of the ground was a special area cordoned off for seating local officials, the top echelon of the Kanker district political and bureaucratic class including the local Members of the Provincial Legislative Assembly, the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police and the Director of the recently established College of Jungle Warfare and Counter-Terrorism. Assisted by the villagers, I had to move from one god to the next as I was first introduced to them and then perform the rituals of propitiation as I

had done in the *madai*. These introductions made me come face to face with different gods with their particular attributes, powers and histories.



Photo 6. Axe, trumpet and metal chain forms of gods, Kanker Palace, October 2011

Even as I went about this task, I could hear the drumbeats getting louder and louder in the background. By the time I finished, several *anga dev* and other gods had begun to dance in the middle of the ground. Hoisted up by their bearers, they moved in playful abandon to the rhythms of the drums (Photo 7). Beginning slowly, the drumbeats gathered pace, and the movements became boisterous. At one point, it seemed as if the gods were throwing themselves up into the air, leaving the safe perch of the shoulders of their bearers. So hectic had the dance turned that there was a thick swirl of dust that had risen from the ground and was blinding the people standing around. And then suddenly, an *anga dev* lunged towards me, caught me up in its cleft, and pulled me to the center of the dancing circle. I felt the same sense of helplessness as I had done at the time of the *madai*. In this instance, it was magnified many times over. And I found myself dancing to



the now deafening sounds of drums, lost in the melee of the *anga dev*, barely managing to keep my feet on the ground. It was like coming into another world. The Dasehra confronted me with new questions even as the old ones continued to rankle. What was this world to which I was so connected, so central, and which yet eluded me?



Photo 7. *Anga Dev* dancing at Kanker Palace during Dasehra, October 2011

### **The World of the Anga Dev**

In the years following my father's death, the larger world of the *anga dev* that my father must have inhabited came into view, beyond the spectacular events of the *madai* and the Dasehra, in the everyday life of the *anga dev* and the villagers who came with them in large numbers to our palace. The strong relationship between the royal *anga dev* and the other *anga dev*, and between the raja and the villagers, became clear from

practices about which I was told and in which I was asked to participate throughout the year. One of these was the practice of taking the royal *anga dev* to the villages for a variety of reasons concerned with the daily life of the villagers. I found that the villagers regularly applied to the raja to take Chhote Pat to their villages by submitting a request in a stamped document called *iqrarnama*. The supplicants, ranging from groups of villages to a single family, would state the nature of the problem they were facing and why the intervention of Chhote Pat was necessary. They mentioned the ceremony they would perform, promised to take care of Chhote Pat as was customary, and undertook not to cause trouble on account of their activity to anyone.

The problems for which the villagers petitioned to have Chhote Pat intervene were of a wide variety, ranging from theft to drought and illness and the general well being of gods and the people. In the *iqrarnama* they would lament the fact that their own gods, including the *anga dev*, were being unable to deal with the problem and hence that they needed the intervention of the raja's *anga dev*: this was now their only recourse. In most cases, they wanted to perform rituals of propitiation for Chhote Pat along with that for their village gods. At the end they said that they would be careful to see that Chhote Pat was kept well and there was no *danga-fasad* (disorder) as a result of these activities.

The initial verbal request was made to the *pujari* of Chhote Pat who would then come to the palace to talk to us, my brother Surya and me, about whether the request could be granted. During my father's illness and after his demise, in my absence, Surya had been officiating in place of the raja in the *anga dev* practices. The *pujari* and Surya often engaged in long discussions about the requests and I soon found out that there were many issues, including legal ones, which needed to be assessed before permission could

be granted. Cases that required careful consideration had increased in the period since Surya started helping my father with these matters. The activity performed by Chhote Pat, sometimes on his own but mostly together with the *anga dev* and other gods of the village, I was told, consisted in the practice of spirit divination. The *anga dev* were *jeevrans* (spirits) who spoke either through signs made by their bodily movement or by possessing a *sirha* (literally, “he who can carry a spirit on his head”), a special category of persons who were skilled in this activity, divined what the cause of a particular problem was and suggested its resolution. Being the *anga dev* of the raja, Chhote Pat was able to muster the power of the *anga dev* of the entire realm and of the raja, who was often referred to as a *dev*, to resolve the problem.

Surya and the *pujari* of Chhote Pat told me that in recent years there had been cases connected with the divination of crimes and criminals where the accused person or party had refused to accept the disclosure of Chhote Pat. This had caused conflict in the villages. There was already a practice of reporting the *iqrarnama* for the knowledge of the local police *thana* (station) but my brother was keen that we follow this procedure without fail so that we would not be responsible for any tension resulting from the visit of Chhote Pat. There had been one case when together with a local journalist, an aggrieved party had reported Chhote Pat’s visit to the police, charging the villagers with dabbling in *andh vishwas* (superstition), and Chhote Pat and his *pujari* had been locked up in jail. When I expressed my horror at the possible repercussions this practice could have, I was told that in most cases the police, usually unable to resolve matters, was happy to leave the matter to the *anga dev* and the villages, and would even seek their intervention in many instances. When I continued to express doubts about Chhote Pat’s village visits, I

was told that once when a child's headless body was found in a village, it was Chhote Pat who had led the police to where the head had been buried, and then helped find the murderer.

Indeed it turned out, most of Chhote Pat's village visits, and the activities of the village *anga dev*, were meant for *gaon banana* or the restoration of the peace and well being of the village in situations of droughts and illnesses. I was curious to see what transpired in these practices but was advised not to go with Chhote Pat for the visits since this was not the protocol. So I had to wait for the appropriate occasion, some event of significance, where the villagers themselves, as it had been in the case of my father, solicited my presence. Fortunately such occasions were fairly common except that towards the later years of his life my father had often chosen, for reasons of protracted illness, not to go. So the villagers would either invite Surya or in his absence, make do with the Chhote Pat.

Once my desire to participate in these events, called *jatra*, was made known, invitations started pouring in. In fact I was told that the *jatra* had been incomplete without the presence of the raja, and that they had stopped asking because they were told that the raja was unable to attend. Of course, I was hardly able to measure up to their expectations of full participation as my father must have done but I did attend some *jatra* that left a lasting impact on me, a few of which need recounting here. Each of them introduced me to another aspect of the world of the *anga dev* and their peoples. More importantly, I came to hear many accounts of the past that involved the raja, the gods and the people.



One of these occasions, in the late summer of 2006, was a *baithak* (meeting)<sup>14</sup> of the *bhumkal* (people of the land, from *bhum* meaning “land”/“world”) of a *pargana* (a territorial unit of the time of the princely state) of 52 villages held at Bhawgir-Nawagaon where the presiding *anga dev* was Sone Kunwar. The village of Bhawgir-Nawagaon is 15 kms. East of Kanker town. The shrine of Sone Kunwar is situated in a grove between the village and a river that flows besides it. In a clearing in the grove is a thatched structure supported by four wooden poles. It is here that Sone Kunwar resides, hung from the top of the ceiling by four ropes that are looped around its four limbs.

When I reached the village, the *dev majhi* (headman of villages under an *anga dev pargana*) and *gaita* (priest) of Sone Kunwar came to receive (*parghaana*) me. I was taken to Sone Kunwar where I performed a quick ritual of propitiation in the manner of the *madai*. After this, we were introduced to others gods related to Sone Kunwar. They were in the form of stones installed around the shrine of the *anga dev*. Among them were Shitala Mata who was the *gram devi* (village goddess), *bhumihar dev* (god/holder of land, the first settler) and Chikli Pat Kaina, Sone Kunwar’s sister, all of whom together with Sone Kunwar, look after the *pargana*.

The *baithak* comprised the *bhumkal* of the *pargana* and was led by the *dev majhi* and *gaita* of Sone Kunwar. There was a large bamboo mat on the ground and we all sat down on it facing the hut of Sone Kunwar. A person, who I later learnt was the headmaster of a school, was asked to prepare to bear Sone Kunwar so that the proceedings of the *baithak* could begin. He wore a pair of trousers and a shirt and had to change into a broadcloth that he wrapped around the middle. Meanwhile the *siyan*

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<sup>14</sup> The term *baithak*, which literally means “meeting,” refers most commonly to the decision-making assembly/council of the village. It is however also projected out in scale to refer to larger decision-making meetings.

(village elders) among the *bhumkal* began talking to us. I was told how happy they were that I was visiting, and how they missed my father's presence. My grandfather had been a more frequent visitor. Not only would he come for all the *jatra* but also stop over to meet Sone Kunwar when he was hunting and camping nearby. Unless he had the permission of raja Sone Kunwar, he was unable to hunt.

Once there had been a major drought and nothing that the villagers and their gods did would help. People were dying because there was no water and food. At that point the villagers had called my grandfather who came on an elephant from Kanker to the shrine of Sone Kunwar. Together, the villagers and the raja propitiated Sone Kunwar. Even as this was happening, it began raining heavily. It rained so much that the river broke its banks and the raja's elephant was unable to cross the river on its way back.

When the bearer of Sone Kunwar was ready, our conversation was concluded, and the circle that we had formed was broken and our seating places rearranged. Sone Kunwar was now hoisted up in such a way that his limbs straddled the bearer's shoulders and when balanced, was standing horizontally. The *dev majhi*, *gaita*, few *siyan* and I were made to sit facing Sone Kunwar at the front with the rest of the gathering behind us. The *gaita* then began silently asking Sone Kunwar the reason for the drought and what lay ahead. He asked if any god was upset and if anything could be done to help. Every once in a while, Sone Kunwar would tilt forward so that he would have to be caught by the bearer in time to prevent him from falling off. Each time this happened the *gaita* picked a few grains of rice from a heap kept in a small basket in front of him and counted the grains. This question and answer session went on for two hours. Several people from the *baithak* took turns to converse with the *anga dev*.

When we left I was not sure what had been discovered. Later Surya was told that the drought had to do with an unkept promise that a village among the 52 had made to propitiate Chikli Pat Kaina, whose home village was Kanagaon, outside the *pargana*. Because this had not been done, and the villagers of Kanagaon were suffering from various problems and as a consequence there had been little rain. Chikli Pat Kaina had asked for a ring, the sacrifice of goat and a feast for all the villagers of the 52 villages and Kanagaon as propitiation. The *pargana* had therefore resolved to complete this task.

The world of Sone Kunwar *anga dev* was fleshed out more fully for me when I attended a *jatra*, again at Bhawgir-Nawagaon, in early 2007, to participate in a very interesting and critical activity in the world of *anga dev*, the making and consecration of an *anga dev* himself. I was told by the *siyan* that Sone Kunwar *anga dev*, apart from being the *pargana dev* of 52 mixed tribal and caste villages, is also the ancestral *anga dev* of the Marai clan of the Gonds. He is the son of Lingo, one of the seven brothers of the originary Gond family, with his home in Semurgaon in Bastar. Lingo is an ancestral god of exceptional qualities some of which he has passed on to Sone Kunwar. The Marai people live in the northern areas of the former princely state of Bastar and the southern part of the former princely state of Kanker. The *gaita* of Sone Kunwar has usually been a Marai.

The Marai families living in Bedma in Bastar had been in the past requesting and taking Sone Kunwar to their village for *jatra*. Once when they had done so in 2005, they refused to return Sone Kunwar to his home in Bhawgir-Nawagaon. They argued that since the Kanker Marais had originally come from Bastar, the rightful place of Sone Kunwar was in Bedma. On the other hand, the Bhawgir-Nawagaon Marais argued that

they had come away from Bastar because they had no *maan* (respect) there and that the Kanker raja had accepted the *raj-pat* (rule) of Sone Kunwar over 52 villages, a far greater position than they would ever get in Bastar.

The *gaita* and *dev majhi* of Bhawgir-Nawagaon visited Bedma several times to bring Sone Kunwar back but to no avail. They claimed that they were also threatened by the *dalam* (Naxalites) in Bedma against returning. Despairing of Sone Kunwar's return, the *siyan* of Bhawgir-Nawagaon then claimed that Sone Kunwar's spirit was still with them, and what the Bedma Marais had in their possession was merely the *chola* (cloth, form) of Sone Kunwar and not his spirit. They visited Semurgaon to seek permission from Lingo to make another form for Sone Kunwar according to custom. Once that had been done, Sone Kunwar had to be re-established as *anga dev* through an interrogation of his efficacy at two places, at Bhangaram in Bastar, and at Bhawgir-Nawagaon in the presence of the raja. I will discuss Bhangaram in detail in the sixth chapter. At the *jatra* in Bhawgir-Nawagaon, Kanker, my presence was solicited.

It was a large gathering at Bhawgir-Nawagaon, with all the gods of the *pargana* in attendance, where Sone Kunwar was presented to us. The authenticity of his spirit and the efficacy of his powers were tested through rituals involving divination through the reading of Sone Kunwar's movements and the intercession of several well-known *sirha*. In my presence, Chhote Pat conducted a final set of tests. Once Sone Kunwar had been restored, he was asked to choose his *gaita* anew. Once again, through an elaborate set of gestures and movements, Sone Kunwar selected his *gaita*, who was then submitted to me for ratification. I was told by the *siyan* that when Narharideo, the raja of Kanker (1853-1903), had given Sone Kunwar his *raj-pat* over the *pargana* at the time when he had

moved northwards from his father's village Semurgaon, the raja and the other gods had tested the powers of Sone Kunwar. Because as the son of Lingo, he possessed extraordinary qualities, he won his kingdom. Since then, there had never been a problem with his rule until the Bedma people played a trick and took him away. It was thus necessary to restore Sone Kunwar to his rightful place. I was also told by the *siyan* how the version of Sone Kunwar with the Bedma villagers had failed the test at Bhangaram but since the Bedma villagers were up to mischief, they had not heeded this decision.

As I struggled to take all this in, I found myself drawn into another *anga dev* development, this time willingly. Although I was keen to hear the accounts of the past that accompanied the *jatra*, they seemed to be those, which, as raja, I already inhabited, yet could not fully relate to. It was like a double life, fabulous and real, that left me uncomfortable and awkward. What I heard now came from what seemed to me to be just this kind of split place but surprisingly it betrayed none of the discomfort I was agonizing over. It was an account of the past, consciously called *itihās* or history, which I heard from Manohar Netam.

Netam, aged 60, is a Gond journalist and social activist, and had been closely connected with the organization of the Dasehra at the palace. Netam was planning to set up a forum, which he had named *Gaita Guniya Sirha Baiga Kalyan Sangh* (Union for the Welfare of Gaita, etc.), to petition the Government of Chhattisgarh for a grant of forestland for the creation of a botanical garden to preserve traditional medicine. The terms *gaita*, *guniya*, *sirha* and *baiga* mentioned in the name of his forum are all generic names for categories of persons associated with the gods and especially *anga dev*. They are also all persons who deal with what we might understand as traditional medicine.

Netam was keen that I support his project because he felt that my presence would help galvanize the people he was hoping to organize and give weight to his proposal with the government (see Photo 8 below). He sought to persuade me by giving me an account of his people's *itihās*, in which his own life-story and that of his people, as also mine, was inextricably interwoven. In fact he tried to convince me that it was not an option for me to refuse him because, as raja, I was inevitably involved. A brief account of Netam's history will be illuminating.



Photo 8. Poster for Manohar Netam's conference that prominently displays photos of the rajas of Bastar and Kanker, 2009.

Netam was born in Bhuigaon, a village in the Charama region in the north of the

princely state of Kanker. His family held the *malguzari* (tax-collection rights) of Masulipani circle of which Bhuigaon was a constituent village. Bhuigaon was a mixed caste-tribe village with roughly equal representations of Gonds of several *gotra* (lineage), and castes like Teli (oil-pressers), Kurmi (cobblers), Raut (cattle-herders), Dhobi (washermen), Kevat (fisherfolk) and Mahar (weavers). The Netams were the *thakur* (primary landholders) and *bhumihar* (founding family) of Bhuigaon, also the reason why they held the *malguzari*, owning around 25 acres of land that was by far the most held by one family in the Masulipani circle. Netam's grandfather possessed a horse-drawn cart that was a rarity even among the *malguzars*.

Netam's village had a host of deities of which the *budha* or *bhumihar dev* (first or early ancestor) was the most important for the Netam family as the founding family as also the whole village because the well being of the village depended on the constant propitiation of the *purkhe* (ancestors). It is the *budha dev* who had broken the soil for the first time to till the land he had identified with the help of his own ancestors as the most suitable for settlement. Together, the *budha dev* and his ancestors had propitiated the *bhum* – the forest and its trees, the rivers and the land – and forged a *samanjasya* (literally “harmony” but in Netam’s explication “balance” because many of the forces of the *bhum* were inimical and had to be countered or held in check continuously) which would make the land settled a place of nurture and prosperity.<sup>15</sup> The *budha dev*, by his act of founding the village and working out the required balance, thus became the village's *thakur-bhumihar* (founder-landholder). Netam’s family was descended from him.

As others settled in the village, Gonds and non-Gonds, they joined their ancestors

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<sup>15</sup> Netam’s *samanjasya* is the same as *madai*, or “securing.” In both cases the significant aspect to note is the balance of forces required to achieve it. I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter five.

to the *budha dev/anga dev*, thus harnessing for the continued prosperity and life of the village the resources of their own ancestors. Just as the ancestors of *budha dev* had been witness to the founding of the village, the *anga dev*, combining in him all the ancestors of the village, remained witness to its continuance and well being.

Once, when the raja came for hunting with his men, he was struck by the power of the *anga dev*. He was suffering from leprosy so he decided to propitiate the *anga dev* by bathing in the River Mahanadi. He emerged from the river cured of the ailment, shining with light. Realizing the *anga dev's* general power over the people and the land, and impressed by his own experience, the raja joined his own ancestors to the *anga dev*, hoping to draw from its power and became in this process part of the balance of the land. The villagers too were drawn to the raja who was effulgent after his bath in the river and showed such devotion to the *anga dev*: they decided that the raja, now their kin, could be entrusted with the protection of their village.

Netam was a precocious and gifted child. Among all his siblings, he was the most keenly devoted to the *anga dev*, closely observing and participating in the conversations that 'the *anga dev* would have with the villagers through his uncle who was a *sirha*. His uncle also taught him the art of healing, using the *jadi-buti* (herbs) in the jungle around his village. Netam visited the palace of the raja in Kanker when he was six years old, accompanying the *anga dev* of his village who was visiting the raja's palace for Dasehra. He was also the only one of the children in the family who was sent to acquire primary and then secondary education in the recently opened (post-1947) schools in the nearby villages of Chinori and then Lakhanpur. Netam matriculated in Biology from the Narhardeo High School in Kanker town (set up by and named after one of the rajas of



Kanker) before going to Bhopal to get a bachelor's degree in Sociology.

All this while he did odd jobs to support himself but knew that his work lay in Kanker and for his *bhumkal*. Netam said that he had been given many signs by the *anga dev* for his future. Once when he was bathing near the river, he accidentally fell into its swirling waters. Just when he felt that the river would swallow him up, he reports, a *jeev* (spirit), according to him most probably a big fish or tortoise (which is the ancestral marker of the Netam lineage among the Gonds), dived up from the bed of the river and slithered under him to steady and carry him to the safety of the bank. His ancestors had intervened to protect his life.

Blessed and guided by his ancestors, Netam returned from Bhopal to do Law and then work as a freelance journalist in Raipur, closer home to Kanker. Here he began to write on issues connected to the *daman* (exploitation) and *vikas* (development) of the *adivasi* (tribal people). From the mid-80s he began printing a paper in Kanker called *Bastar Ki Awaz* (The Voice of Bastar). Kanker was at that time a part of the Bastar district. He produced the paper with limited funds, raising questions regarding the condition of the *Gondwana Samaj* (the Gond community/society/nation). He hoped to address Gond peoples all over Bastar Division and even beyond. Netam also began associating with the workers' movement in Kanker organized by the Communist Party of India, especially working for the rights of rickshaw-pullers. He contested the elections to the State Assembly and the Parliament several times but lost the election each time given his inadequate resources.

As he worked for his *bhumkal*, Netam realized how young people were disregarding their *parampara* (tradition). He believed that this worked to their detriment.

The question of health reflected the malaise that was afflicting his people. He felt that the rush towards modern medicine and technology and the rejection of traditional healing as backward had been premature and costly for his *bhumkal*. They were suffering due to their dependence on badly run and expensive health system of modern medicine represented mainly by government run health facilities; and traditional healing as practiced by the *gaita*, *guniya*, *sirha*, *baiga* had declined. The transformation and depletion of forests due to the practices of monoculture and commercial forestry under the Forest Department meant that the herbs required for making traditional medicine were now difficult to find. All these developments had resulted in the loss of the age-old balance that had characterized Gond life in the past.

Netam argued that traditional healing was deeply connected to the balance of the land and thus to the *bhumkal*. In the time of the ancestors when there was a death, the spirit of the deceased joined the *bhum*. On the third day following, the family of the deceased went to the river. One member of the family was supposed to immerse his hands in the water and feel around for a *jeev* (here some form of life, small fish, insect, etc.). When a life form was caught, the spirit of the deceased was considered as having returned.

The returned spirit was then taken to the trees in the forest to divine whether it wanted to stay with the family, in which case something related to the tree (bark, wood, stone lying by) was taken back to the family house, or wanted to fly away into the forest, in which case it would be let loose in the woods. Many ancestors stayed with their families, joined to the *anga dev*, and many others flew away into the forest. In either case, these ancestors joined the village and its *bhum* through the forest and its trees, creating

and sustaining the founding balance. The forest, rich with herbs, which provided the medicinal herbs for the treatment of illness and disease, embodied the joining of the spirits with the land, the original balance of life.

Traditional healing thus derived from and was imbued with this life-sustaining quality. Though all the people are expected to know of healing through medicinal herbs, there has come to be a group of people who have special skills in healing (*baiga*, *guniya*, etc.). These were the people who kept the *anga dev* as *gaita* and acted as media in the *anga dev's* conversations with the villagers as *sirha*: Netam was hoping to restore them and their healing practices to their rightful place.

Netam's history combined what I had marked as fabulous with what I could identify as history in a way that amazed and attracted me. It suggested a resolution to the dilemma of two worlds and to the doubts of being a raja. It did so within a framework of the struggle of the *adivasi* to which I could relate. But on the other hand, the position of the raja in his account seemed unable to attend to the tension I had experienced in the *madai* and the Dasehra, and to the undercurrents of power-relations that I had perceived in the matter of Chhote Pat's visits to the villages. I was soon to get embroiled in a legal case relating to Chhote Pat that seriously undermined Netam's resolutions and bore out my misgivings.

In 2007, the year Netam broached his plan with me, I came to be involved in a case in which some persons from the village of Bansla in the northern part of the Kanker district had sued my deceased father, accusing him of forcibly taking possession of Chhote Pat Anga Dev which they claimed belonged to them.<sup>16</sup> In a petition submitted to

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<sup>16</sup> *Gopal Singh Dehari, etc. vs. Udai Pratap Deo Maharajadhiraj, etc.*, File No.290/B-120/09070, Kanker: Court of District Collector, 09.27.2007.

the court of the District Magistrate of Kanker on 18.10.2007, five persons of the Dehari clan of the Halba tribe argued that at some point in the past, Chhote Pat, who was a *gram dev* (village god) of Bansla, had customarily come to the town of Kanker for a *jatra* in which gods from all the *pargana* had collected at the palace. However, Chhote Pat did not return to Bansla after the *jatra* but was forcibly detained by the raja.

They informed the magistrate that though they had made several requests for the return of Chhote Pat, the accused had refused to comply.<sup>17</sup> They further argued that as a result their village had been suffering from the wrath of gods, and the happiness and peace of the village had been lost. They requested the magistrate to take appropriate action to have Chhote Pat returned to them as soon as possible. The supplicants had first presented their demand to no less than the Chief Minister of the Government of Chhattisgarh in a *jan-adalat* (people's court) held in Bhanupratap-pur.

After my father's death, I had succeeded to his position as accused in the case. The case was found to be very weak and the magistrate was unable to give a decision in favor of the applicants. The applicants appealed to the Revenue Department of the Govt. of Chhattisgarh for redress. Meanwhile, I began enquiring about the matter on my own. New stories emerged in the process, two of which I will recount here. Chhote Pat Anga Dev (literally the "younger log god," in relation to Bade or "elder," kept in the main Shitala temple in Kanker, as mentioned earlier) is one of the two *anga dev* of the raja of Kanker. One account of why the raja had come to have custody of these *anga dev* who

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<sup>17</sup> From the "facts" of the matter, since Chhote Pat has been with the raja at least since 1934-35 (*Clandestine Marriage of Maharajkumari of Kanker, Eastern States Agency, with one Jyotilal of Jhansi. Treatment accorded to the Junior Maharani of Kanker and her daughter during the minority of its ruler. 1936-37*, IOR/R/1/1/2598, London: British Library), my father had not forcibly detained the *anga dev*. Further, it seems from many accounts given to me by various people associated with Chhote Pat as well as Mansai Darro, the *dev-majhi* of Bansla, when the complaints had approached my father he had asked them to take Chhote Pat but the deity himself had refused to go.

have thus become ritually superior to all the other *anga dev* in Kanker (though this is often contested), was given to me by 64 year old Mansai Darro, the *dev majhi* of 84 villages of mixed tribal and caste groups in the Bhanupratap-pur area in eastern Kanker. Garh Bansla (or “fort” Bansla), the ritually pre-eminent village among them, houses the temple of Danteshwari, the family deity of the Kanker rulers; and is cited in many accounts as having been the first capital of Kanker under the rulers of the Kandra dynasty (1344-97), one of three to have ruled Kanker.<sup>18</sup> The Kandra dynasty is supposed to have come from a Gond sub-group called Nahar, a community of bamboo cultivators.

According to Darro’s account, once a Nahrin (wife of a Nahar man) was bathing in a pond situated on the side of a glade in the forest. As she was coming out of the pond she saw that the Chhote and Bade Pat Anga Dev, rajas of Garh Bansla, dressed in splendid attire, were dancing in the glade. She was awe-struck and forgot to return home. She kept watching this spectacle, mesmerized by the rhythm of their dance. Her husband, the Nahar, annoyed by the delay in her return, went looking for her and saw this scene. Angry with his wife, he shot an arrow at the dancers, wounding one of Chhote Pat arms. The *anga dev* were incensed and told the Nahar that unless he acknowledged their power and looked after them, his people would not know peace. The *anga dev* have since then been kept with the raja, first at Bansla and then at Kanker. Chhote Pat is broken in one limb and is therefore sometimes also referred to as Khanda Deo (The Broken God).

Darro also recounted another story he had heard about how the royal *anga dev* came to be with the raja. In the time of Narharideo, there was a struggle between him and the Nahars over land in Garh Bansla. Since the *anga dev* of the Nahars, Chhote and Bade

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<sup>18</sup> J. R. Valyani and V. D. Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker Riyasat ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas* (Kanker: Divya Prakashan, 1997), 77-80.

Pat Anga Dev, were being unable to help the Nahars, they were set adrift in the river. Traveling down the river, the *anga dev* floated into Kanker town. The light emitted by the floating brothers blinded the people of Kanker. When he was informed about this, Narharideo had them lifted out of the river and installed in his palace.

When I presented my case before the Revenue Secretary, I found myself unable to give a legally comprehensible and tenable account of the history of Chhote Pat. In fact, as I discovered, there had been a similar difficulty in conveying the substance of the matter from the other party. The official, who thought it was a matter of property, hence its reference to the Revenue Department, was flummoxed about the nature of the case. The neat resolutions of Netam's account, which spoke of the harmonious relationship between the raja and the *bhumkal*, also evaporated in the light of this dispute. The case tended to play out the tension that I had experienced in the relationship between the raja, *anga dev* and people in the *madai* and the Dasehra.

### **Thinking History**

It is with these two episodes in 2007, of Manohar Netam's plans and the Bansla case, in both of which I found myself involved not just as the raja but in the first, as an activist, and second, as a litigant, and sought out "histories" to locate myself more firmly in these dual contexts, that I began to actively think of researching the phenomenon of *anga dev*. It was clear to me that the *anga dev* tradition, in which the role of the raja was crucial, was more than just "religion," as normative discourses of scientific education, rational epistemologies and governance were seeking to cast it. Even Netam, despite his political activities, saw his project as one primarily for the rescue of tribal religious practices.

The central role of the raja, as a symbol of power, in the oral, bodily and spatial, spectacular and everyday practices of the *anga dev* phenomenon, suggested a strong political aspect that was difficult to miss. There were also memories of the past that inhered in these practices, whether as accounts of the past that were narrated, played out in bodily performances of rituals or embedded in sacred spatiality, a potentially rich political articulation that accompanied this phenomenon. In this articulation the people and their gods appeared to claim a critical place in the polity of the princely state; and the distinction between the “secular/political” and “religious/cultural” seemed to break down. The raja’s sovereign claims were challenged, divided and shared: open to contestations and negotiations. What would it mean to write a history of the polity and sovereignty of princely Kanker from this vantage point?

While the *anga dev* practices and accounts seemed to hark back to the past, to pre-colonial and colonial times, when a kingly polity was in place, they also appeared to engage with the political and bureaucratic regimes of the post-colonial state in the present day. In a way, the *anga dev* practices and accounts constituted a political assertion in the present time through an articulation of memories of the past. My visits to the villages and interaction with villagers at the palace, especially during the *baithak* that accompanied the *madai* and Dasehra celebrations at the palace, made me attentive to the political conversation that preceded and/or followed the activity at hand. This talk was in the nature of complaints and protests about the state of affairs vis-à-vis the government, and discussions of how to deal with pressing problems to which the state was not responsive. There was a distinct feeling that traditional local forms of organization and expression had no place in the top-down and distant political and bureaucratic system of the state

which, through its guardianly attitude, was construing these communities as virtually infantile. Netam's disquisition and the Bansla case represented poignant articulations of this disconnect between practices embedded in the world of the *anga dev* and the modern bureaucratic regime. I came to realize that my brother was also involved on behalf of, and as part of, these communities of villagers in informal negotiations with the bureaucracy and the political class for a variety of causes.

To me, the rapid slide of the region of southern Chhattisgarh, of which the district of Kanker is a part, into armed conflict after 2000 underscored the need to understand popular political positions that had never been taken seriously earlier.<sup>19</sup> The formation of the separate state of Chhattisgarh in 2000 meant that the claims of a heavily corporatized developmental state on the rich natural resources of the region could now be pressed through a closer administrative control of the everyday aspects of people's lives. In her monograph *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar* (1997), one of the few serious histories of southern Chhattisgarh, Nandini Sundar has documented this process of the state's increasing intrusion into the lives of the people and the consequently growing disaffection among the people against the state for Bastar, the neighboring district whose history is connected with and comparable to Kanker's.<sup>20</sup> While in Bastar, where the developmentalist penetration is older and deeper, the disaffection against the post-colonial state has taken the shape of an armed conflict which

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<sup>19</sup> The princely state of Kanker was merged with the princely state of Bastar in 1948 to form the district of Bastar in 1948. Together with the northern most areas of Bastar, Kanker was re-constituted into a separate district in 2000 called North Bastar-Kanker. The region of Southern Chhattisgarh comprises the areas of former princely Kanker and Bastar; for a discussion of armed insurgency in recent years see Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-2006* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008); also Rahul Pandita, *Hello Bastar: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement* (Delhi: Tranquebar, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*.



had intensified since 2000, in the Kanker district, this conflict has not yet gained momentum and is still limited to the areas of the south that had formerly been part of the princely state of Bastar.<sup>21</sup> There seemed to be a distinct possibility that this would spread into Kanker proper very soon.

Did the practices and accounts of the *anga dev* constitute an understanding of politics in which people were asserting a popular vision of power and sovereignty against the paternal and top-down regimes of the post-colonial, developmentalist state? At a time when state-peoples relations in Chhattisgarh have come under immense strain and normative understandings of the “state” as a neutral guardian of the “development” of tribal peoples are being dramatically challenged in the popular domain, the political assertions and claims contained in the *anga dev* accounts needed to be fore-grounded.

Though by now I felt impelled to work on a history of polity of the princely state of Kanker based on popular constructions of power and sovereignty contained in the practices and accounts of the *anga dev*, my own implication in the subject of research and the difficulty forecast by the apparent incommensurability of worlds tended to put question marks on its feasibility. It is in these circumstances that I broached the idea of a possible project on the history of politics and state in princely Kanker centering on the *anga dev* with Gyanendra Pandey and Ruby Lal in Delhi in early 2008. With their encouragement, the project subsequently took shape in the next three years at Emory. I was then able to spend a year and a half in Kanker from the end of 2010 to the middle of 2012 doing extensive and intensive fieldwork. The most important question to be confronted in the conception and pursuit of the project was whether and how the *anga*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; Robert S. Anderson and Walter Huber, *The Hour of the Fox: Tropical Forests, the World Bank and Indigenous People in Central India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

*dev* practices and accounts could constitute a valid ground for writing a history of the political. In the following chapter I outline my project in the context of the historiographical field within which it took shape.

## Chapter 2

### The Historiography of the Project

As we have seen in the introductory chapter, the *anga dev* practices and accounts of the past are seen by normative governmental and civic discourses as exotic culture and religion at best and superstition at worst. The *anga dev* practices and accounts have been looked at as primitive artifacts fit for anthropological study, never a place to think from. Is it possible to undertake a political reading of the *anga dev* practices and the accounts and to write a history of polity of the princely Kanker on the terms furnished by them? The problem of doing so becomes clear when we look at the dominant ways in which historians have engaged with tribal peoples and with questions of state formation in the princely states and colonial India.

Dominant historical traditions have constructed groups like the Gond peoples as “primitive tribals” who are “pre-political” and practices like that of the *anga dev* as expressions of primitive culture and religion.<sup>22</sup> New histories of tribal peoples, especially writings drawing from Subaltern Studies, have pointed out the “de-politicization” and “culturization” of the tribal peoples by a range of nationalist as well Marxist histories that have continued to be invested variously in the notion of the “tribal-primitive.”<sup>23</sup> On the question of state formation, a recent anthology of writings on the princely states has pointed out that British-India centric histories have for long presented the view that the princes of India presided over stultified polities where neither they nor their subject

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<sup>22</sup> Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: OUP, 1982), 3-8.

<sup>23</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics.”

peoples had much agency, and largely followed the dominant colonial script in matters of rule.<sup>24</sup>

In the *anga dev* accounts of the past we see a contestatory view of the relationship between “rulers” and their tribal “subjects,” where power, authority and sovereignty are not pre-determined and final and tribal peoples are not passive recipients of rule. The colonial-princely state emerges in these accounts not as an inexorable dominion under which the tribal people lie supine but a contested one that is shaped as much by the people and their cosmological scheme as it shapes their life and in which they are constitutive of and central to the polity of the colonial-princely state. Unlike in historical accounts of tribal peoples and state formations where the distinction between “state” and “subjects” is often absolute, in these accounts tribal peoples and their life-forces claim to participate in the making of the polity. In fact it is precisely because of the *political* challenge that such a perspective offers to dominant conceptions of politics and tribal peoples that history works to neutralize it through a culturization of the tribe.<sup>25</sup>

An important factor in dominant historical characterizations has been historians’ reliance on statist records and the neglect or dismissal of popular forms of memory like the *anga dev* practices and oral accounts of the past. Popular memory is seen as “mythical,” unable to satisfy the rationalist protocols of history. It is seen as a cultural artifact rather than a political discourse, fit for an anthropological study not a historical reading. Unlike historical accounts, *anga dev* practices and accounts of the past are at once one of enchantment and disenchantment, in which both ancestral spirits and modern

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<sup>24</sup> Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati, eds., *India’s Princely States: People, Princes and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics.”

states are agentive. In them agency is given to elements we may recognize as historical – *angrez*, *raja*, his *malguzars* – but equally to those we might not-ancestral gods, spirits, sorcery, magic, clearly a wider field of actors, motivations and possibilities than those of historical accounts. In the *anga dev* ceremonies described in the introductory chapter, the un-graspable, intangible nature of my experience does not lend itself easily to the rules of objective narration. In the *anga dev* practices and accounts what the historian would recognize as incongruous elements belonging to two different temporalities are one world.

How might we reclaim the *anga dev* practices and accounts for the writing of history? How might we render them in a historical narrative? The answer lies in unraveling history's history as a quintessentially modernist knowledge practice of change over time, and consequently its foundational "othering" of the idea of the "primitive." A political reading of *anga dev* practices and pasts thus necessitates challenging not just dominant historical narratives but the disciplinary protocol of history itself. The answer also requires a fashioning of new strategies of historical writing that are self-critical and multi-vocal. In this chapter I will look critically at the historiography of tribal peoples and state formation in princely and colonial India in order to posit the conditions of possibility for my project. I will then briefly lay out my project arguing how it draws on a critique of history, is located in the boundary between history and its other, and works through the erasure of that boundary.

### **"History," "Culture," "Primitives"**

The primitivization, culturization and depoliticization of tribal peoples have a long history. Prathama Banerjee, in two very important works, the monograph *Politics of*

*Time: "Primitives" and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (2006) and article, "Culture/politics: the curious double bind of the Indian adivasi" (2010), has tracked the simultaneous and connected emergence of the knowledge practice of history and the idea of the "primitive" in Europe and India.<sup>26</sup> Banerjee argues that the emerging cross-continental regimes of the nation state, capitalism, colonization and nationalism required the suppression of the politically oppositional, which was set up as "primitive," a category that could be politically delegitimized. This was an enterprise accomplished through the production of the notion of "modern" in the positing of time as universally "historical": in this construction the primitive was what had been passed over or overcome. The modern stood for order and "discipline," "reason" and "progress." In contrast, the primitive was "disorderly," "irrational" and "backward-looking."

The political contrariness of the primitive could now be banished to the realm of the archaic, not politics at all, so that the only horizon, future and possibility remained that of the historical, of modernity, of development and progress. Banerjee points out that this was in no way an uncontested and easy process and confronted internal critiques arising from different locations as well as eventually necessitated a certain "schizophrenic conception of the primitive within."<sup>27</sup> These strategies were particularly fraught in the colony, as Banerjee's study of nineteenth-century Bengal demonstrates, and took a different form in contrast to the metropolis.

Banerjee argues that confronted with ascriptions of backwardness themselves, the nationalist Hindu, upper classes of Bengal responded to their threatened alterity to

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<sup>26</sup> Prathama Banerjee, *The Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

modernity in a variety of ways. The foremost task was to claim historicity, modernity and progress. But unlike in Europe where the primitive could be and was largely externalized into the colony, they were faced with the troubling proximity of real life primitives in the form of the Santhals and other tribal groups: the primitive could not simply be exorcized to another land or fictionalized.

Also, the desires of anti-colonial nationalism for difference from the colonizer made the default authentic status of the tribes as primitive and their seemingly instinctive rebelliousness towards colonialism appear as attractive qualities through which the new nation could argue for its distinctiveness and anti-imperialism. The struggle with this “primitive within” led to the conception of the “tribal” as “cultural,” a “double procedure that allowed for the harnessing of the tribe to the nation’s history, but through the exile of tribe into the domain of culture...releasing history from the burden of having to directly admit the politicized constitution of the tribe into modernity.”<sup>28</sup>

The national classes, Banerjee argues, have continued to face similar dilemmas in the post-colonial period in different way. On the one hand, the modernizing and developmental projects of the nation state, now including rapid industrialization and privatization that fall very heavily on the tribal peoples, have led to the increasing and repeated radicalization of the tribal peoples. On the other, the delusionary claims of national success in a globalizing world premised on these projects continue to require the enunciation of a uniquely Indian modernity in which the tribal/cultural is a critical trace of difference with the West.

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<sup>28</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics,” 127.

This paradoxical political relationship of the modern nation and the primitive was constituted by, written into and resolved in the knowledge practices of the twin disciplines of history and anthropology, where history became the location of the modern-political and anthropology that of the primitive-cultural. As Banerjee puts it: “if labeling something as political is to impute to it a conscious agency and contingent positioning, to gloss it over as culture immediately erases this aspect of self-consciousness.”<sup>29</sup>

Since the primitive was seen as backward because of its inability to understand the drift of time, knowledge or self-knowledge itself was presented as a sensibility that was peculiarly historical, separated from the unreflecting and non-transformative time of culture, habit and practice. History was about self-knowledge, anthropology about the knowledge of the other. History became the knowledge practice of time in modernity, an empty, abstract, rationalized linear temporality in which the contaminating contemporaneity of the primitive could be “sanitized” through the fiction of representation.<sup>30</sup>

Since history was the time of the modern, and since there was no other time for the present and the future, primitive subjectivity was discounted as a possibility for the modern-historical. Just as the primitive had a future in modernity only through development, it had a place in history only through representation. It was only the singular, unified citizen of modernity who was the subject of history. The primitive, not “*present*” in our time, could only be “*re-presented*” in history as object and never subject

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>30</sup> Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, 6.



of knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Tribal life, depoliticized and culturized, became the subject of anthropological study of vestiges of another time. The tribal/primitive had no meaningful place in history and politics.

Banerjee points out that it was only the tribal rebellions, which insistently forced the lived alterity of the tribes into view, that became the subject of history, as “events” that served anti-colonialism and could in addition be seen as a matter of “tribal habit.” Banerjee writes, “before and after this moment, (they) remain relatively invisible in the archive.”<sup>32</sup> Banerjee is however mindful of how history, or the modern, is dominant but not hegemonic, and hence how what we might call differential modernity or counter-modernity constantly challenges it.

In her study of Santhal *huls* (rebellions) in nineteenth century Bengal, she foregrounds Santhali renditions of the *hul* in poetry, songs and other oral expressions which portrayed *hul* not as in history, as causally comprehensible events, but as “acts” that were located in the irreducibility and contingency of time.<sup>33</sup> In this othering and culturization of tribes in history, Banerjee points out, tribal forms of expression, whether they be oral accounts of the past, songs, poetry, riddles, folk-tales, rituals, etc., were considered non-realist, non-representational, mythical, fictional, and hence unverifiable by history. They could only be used for embellishing the main narrative, or as we will see in the case of the histories of Kanker, adjuncts to the main text, never an archive on the basis of which history could be rendered. Such a position has closed off various forms of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

tribal self-expression from the historian's oeuvre of "sources" from which histories are rendered.

### **"Tribe" in India**

It is important not to lose sight of the genealogy and realization of the term or notion "tribe" as the category through which the primitivism of the primitive was and is suggested and marked in official classification in the colonial and post-colonial periods; and the way in which it is claimed, in different iterations such as aborigines and *adivasi*, to make a recognizable place vis-à-vis the nation by peoples who are described by these names.<sup>34</sup> The term "tribe" as it appears in anthropological, sociological and historical knowledge practices is understood by dominant positions as describing a pre-state social unit comprising a set of families (at various levels of grouping, including that of clan) descendant from a common ancestor, which is bounded politically, territorially-environmentally, demographically, linguistically, socio-culturally and economically.<sup>35</sup>

Politically it is considered as pre-state, communal and as sometimes showing signs of rudimentary politics in the form of chieftaincy. It is seen as inhabiting a niche territory or eco-system and its life-rhythms derive from and are confined to it. A tribe is seen to wander but only in response to basic requirements. Its population is characterized as typically low, as sharing a lineage and being endogamous. It is defined by linguistic and cultural traits that distinguish it from other tribes. Its religion is described as being usually cultic and nature-based. Its economy is considered autarchic and for subsistence, land and its fruits belonging to the community. By implication the "tribal" is constructed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>35</sup> Morton Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (Menlo Park: Cummings, 1975).

as “primitive,” “atavistic,” “inward and backward-looking,” “unproductive,” simultaneously “innocent” and inclined to violence, “unpredictable,” “irrational,” “archaic” and “future-less.”

In *The Notion of Tribe* (1975), Morton Fried, by tracing the European genealogy of the term has argued how a variously used and protean word was fixed, reified and applied during colonial conquests and expansion in Africa and elsewhere to construct and describe native peoples as backward, and therefore represented a “secondary phenomenon,” a technology to control and manipulate the colonial subjects.<sup>36</sup> Arjun Appadurai has demonstrated how, in the context of South Asia, this essentializing, classifying and enumerating colonizing imperative reduced a fluid and variegated landscape of social groups to unitary, singular, unchanging and universal categories of “caste” and “tribe.”<sup>37</sup> Caste was construed as the organizing principle for what was understood as mainstream society, as advanced in terms of societal evolution and also ethnically different from tribe but it was not clear how the population would divide between these two categories.

In her study of the emergence of the colonial view of caste as a single, standardized and hierarchized grid, a stable series that had an all-India applicability, and which thus also separated agricultural castes from tribes, Rashmi Pant has examined colonial administrative and ethnographic practices of the census in N. W Provinces and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 99-105; A similar point is made in Andre Beteille, “The Idea of Indigenous People,” *Current Anthropology* 39, No. 2 (1998): 187.

<sup>37</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

Awadh.<sup>38</sup> The various administrator-ethnographers in charge of the census – Ibbetson, Nesfield, Risley – shifted uneasily between occupational, anthropometric and other emphases to consolidate the methods of the census. Pant writes of the complaints made by officials of the difficulty of making caste/tribe lists because respondents returned varied, confused names, titles and surnames that seemed fluid and contested. Since pre-colonial societies in India had no clear distinction between peoples called tribes and others, nor a categorical and consistent sense of primitivism, the census process was very arbitrary in terms of identifying tribes and castes, and attendant aspects.<sup>39</sup> Andre Beteille has argued that since there was no word for “tribe” in local languages, administrative doubt eventually being settled with *jan-jati* (a new compound of two not necessarily related words), the term “tribe” was even more of a colonial invention than “caste” whose equivalence with the term *jati*, and the fixing of *jati* itself, were also highly problematic.<sup>40</sup>

The census, in relation to “tribes,” was centrally concerned with separating castes from tribes, and then with separating different tribes, an exercise that finally determined these categories themselves.<sup>41</sup> This is a move that has a direct bearing on the study of Kanker. Before the census operations became a systematic and unified project in 1881, the people of India were divided by early census operations along religious lines of “Hindu,” “Muslim” and “Others.” In 1881, the scope of the census was elaborated to 14

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<sup>38</sup> Rashmi Pant, “The Cognitive Status of Caste in Colonial Ethnography: A Review of Some Literature on the N. W. Province and Oudh,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24, No. 2 (1987): 145.

<sup>39</sup> Aloka Parasher-Sen, ed., *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Appadurai, “Numbers,” 329.

<sup>40</sup> Beteille, “The Idea of Indigenous People.”

<sup>41</sup> N. K. S. Chaudhuri, “The Enumeration and Treatment of Tribes in Indian Census,” *Man in India* XXXIII, No. 3 (1952): 60.

religions, with one of them being designated the “Aboriginal Pantheon.”<sup>42</sup> Given the vagueness of both this term as well as of the term “Hindu,” the Deputy Commissioner of Berar extended the term Hindu “to the form of worship practiced by the Gonds (the name of the tribe used to describe the peoples in Kanker) and other “Aboriginal Castes.”<sup>43</sup> In Bengal, in 1881, 1, 365, 215 out of 2,055, 822 adherents of “Aboriginal Religion” were cross listed under the sub-heading “Aboriginal Tribes” under “Hindu Castes.”<sup>44</sup> Another group of about 10, 618, 451 people, outside of “Aboriginal Religion” came to be described as “Semi-Hinduized Aborigines.”<sup>45</sup>

In 1901, Census Commissioner H. H. Risley tried two new approaches.<sup>46</sup> Drawing from the category “Animists” from 1891, used to describe non-Hindu, non-Muslim and non-Christian tribes, he tried to make a case for the separation of “Hinduism proper,” “popular Hinduism” and “Animism.” In the Central Provinces, the critical test of distinguishing a Hindu from an animist was the belief of the former in Mahadeo, recognized as a Hindu god. Risley also sought to categorize tribes, even though the category of tribe had not been settled, from an ethnic perspective, calling them either Dravidian, Mongolian, Turko-Iranian or Balochi.<sup>47</sup>

In 1911, the census experiments continued. All those who did not have a recognizable religion were identified as “tribal.” To the vexing question of how to

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<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri, “Enumeration,” 160.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 162.

distinguish non-Hindu tribes and castes from the Hindus, respondents were asked the following questions: Did they (1) deny the supremacy of Brahmins (2) not receive mantras from them (3) deny the authority of the Vedas (4) not worship the great Hindu gods (5) not find the service of good Brahmins (6) have no Brahmin priests (7) have no access to Hindu temples (8) cause pollution in various ways (9) bury their dead and (10) eat beef and did not pay homage to the cows.<sup>48</sup> Since none described as “tribes” satisfied all the conditions, these returns were eventually rejected as faulty. The experiments with the census continued however. In 1921, “Tribal Religion” replaced “Animism” as the latter was seen as an insufficient separation from Hinduism.<sup>49</sup> In 1931 “community origin” and in 1941 “community organization” became additional though still more confusing registers through which the tribes were sought to be identified.<sup>50</sup> There was the other unresolved issue of the relationship between “Tribal Religion,” “Hill and Forest Tribes” and “Animists,” which got more complicated with each census.<sup>51</sup>

The classification and discussion of different tribes meanwhile proceeded apace in the practices of colonial ethnological and ethnographic practices. Tribes came to be divided according to culture (mainly language), anthropometry, geography and pathology in ways in which the exclusivity of each tribe was sought to be fixed. The complexity of social identities encountered on the field however continued to dog this enterprise.<sup>52</sup> At

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See Peter Pels, “The Rise and Fall of the Indian Aborigines: Orientalism, Anglicanism, and the Emergence of Ethnography in India, 1833-1869,” in *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology*, ed. Peter Pels and Oscar Selemink (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); K.

the same time, colonial economic and administrative policies were actually realizing some of the fiction of their thinking, creating subjectivities that conformed to their view of tribes. The “wildness” of the Dangis in western India, “criminality” of the Bhils in Rajasthan, the itinerant agriculture of the Baigas in central India and unpredictable movement of the Santhals in Bengal, considered by dominant discourses and governmentality as characteristic of primitive tribal peoples, were actually becoming lived experiences due to colonial policy as they had never been earlier.<sup>53</sup>

Given this history of the notion of “tribe,” I use the terms “tribes,” “tribal” and “tribal peoples” with a full acknowledgement of their burdens, and as categories which are political and contested. I use them in the context of official classification and historical literature in which they are deployed. As I move into my discussion of the *anga dev* accounts, I displace them with local terms that are used in these accounts except when “tribe” is spoken of in these accounts themselves as a category through which citizenship in the nation-state is claimed, however problematically.

### **Nationalist and Marxist Historiography of “Tribe”**

Let me return to the way in which the culturization/rationalization of tribal peoples continues to operate in histories for tribal peoples beyond the simplistic framing discussed earlier. Though nationalist and Marxist histories have often made tribal peoples

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Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Idetured Labour Market of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Anand Yang, ed., *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1985); Vinita Damodaran, “Colonial Constructions of the “Tribe” in India: The Case of Chotanagpur,” *The Indian Historical Review* XXXIII, No. 1 (2006): 44.

<sup>53</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Yang, “Criminality;” Archana Prasad, *Against Colonial Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of the Anti-Modern Tribal Identity* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2003); Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.

the focus of their study, especially in their interest in tribal rebellions, the foundational alterity of tribal peoples to history works back into these writings in various guises. From the late colonial into the post-colonial period, nationalist histories have continued to use this “heavily culturized figure” where the dominant question or dilemma has been that of transition to the time of the modern, of citizen and class, subjectivities considered alien to tribes.<sup>54</sup> Marxist histories of tribes, though they have disputed the nation's claim to speak for the tribal peoples, have relocated the tribes within a proto-revolutionary tribe-peasant-worker continuum, where the question of transition is returned as a question of backwardness of primitive consciousness and the impending transition to class.

In these nationalist and Marxist formulations, tribes, being pre-political, are seen as bearing agency only within historical projects of nationalist or radical guardianship and have no future save those that these developmental narratives furnish. Tribal modes of expression – comprising songs, stories and memories available in various oral forms, either recorded or in practice in contemporary times (like in the case of this project) – are always peripheral to the main narrative in the nationalist and Marxist histories because, by history's definition, they belong to the domain of imagination not amenable to realistic readings. At best they are seen as quaint culture, at worst as false consciousness.<sup>55</sup>

According to these discourses, the fact that the date, authorship and technique of this alternate archive cannot be ascertained makes it highly unstable for historical use. Similarly, that it transacts in gods and spirits renders it unfit, by this dominant view, for the rationalist protocols of history. When this alternate archive has been used, it has been

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<sup>54</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics,” 132.

<sup>55</sup> As pointed out by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 103.



mined for “facts,” information that can be woven together with conventional archival material in a historical narrative. Sometimes, when it is possible, these genres have been read as “histories.” The attempt to write histories with the alternate archive without questioning the protocols of history remains captive to its conversion and assimilation into the historical.

Among some major works in this category of literature are nationalist histories of tribes like those of Bappa Thakkar's *Hamare Adivasi Bhai* (Our Tribal Brothers) (1941), S. Sinha's “Tribal cultures of peninsular India as a dimension of the little tradition in the study of the Indian civilization” (1958), G. S. Ghurye's *The Scheduled Tribes* (1963), K. S. Singh's *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and his Movement, 1874-1901* (1966), M. N. Srinivas' *Social Change in Modern India* (1977) and B. B. Chaudhari's *Tribal Transformation in India* (1992).<sup>56</sup> Prominent among Marxist histories of tribes are A.R. Desai's “Tribes in Transition” (1960) and *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979), Sunil Sen's *Agrarian Struggles in Bengal, 1946-47* (1972), Sukumar Banerjee's *Impact of Industrialization on the Tribal Population of Jharia-Raiganj Coal Field Areas* (1981), B. Datta Ray's *Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in the North East* (1983) and P. K. Bose's *Classes and Class Relations among Tribals of Bengal* (1984), among others.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Bappa Thakker, *Hamare Adivasi Bhai* (Delhi: Prakashan Vibhag, 1941); Surojit Sinha, “Tribal culture of peninsular India as a dimension of the little tradition in the study of Indian civilization: a preliminary statement,” *Man in India* XXXVII, No. 2 (1957): 93; Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes* (Bombay: Popular, 1963); K. S. Singh, *The Dust Storm and Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and his Movement, 1874-1901* (Calcutta: KLM, 1966); Mysore Narsimhachar Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977); Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, *Tribal Transformation in India, Vol. I-IV* (Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992).

<sup>57</sup> A. R. Desai, “Tribes in Transition,” *Seminar* 14 (1960): 19; Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggles in Bengal, 1946-47*, 1972; Sukumar Banerjee, *Impact of Industrialization on the Tribes Population of Jharia-Raiganj Coal Fields* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1981); B. Datta Ray, *Emergence and Role*

The few histories there are of princely Kanker fall within the nationalist tradition and are glaringly one-sided and limited in their perspective on the relationship between state and subjects. Among them the most comprehensive, detailed and popular histories of princely Kanker are J. R. Valyani and V. D. Sahasi's *Bastar aur Kanker Riyasat ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas* (The Political and Cultural History of Bastar and Kanker State) (1998), by the same authors, *Chhattisgarh ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas* (1997), Hiralal Shukla's *History of the Peoples of Bastar* (1992) and Lala Jagdalpuria's *Bastar: Itihas evam Sanskriti* (2000).<sup>58</sup> Most of them have similar perspectives, frameworks and narrative structures. Among their salient features is the tendency to marginalize Kanker and subsume it under Bastar.

Let us look closely at the best known among these works, *Bastar aur Kanker Riyasat ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas*, which does separate Bastar and Kanker to some extent but is otherwise typical. Though both of this book's constitutive sections are called "history," the first is devoted to the "political" and the second to the "cultural" aspects of Kanker's history.<sup>59</sup> The "political" deals with the dynastic history of rulers, their biographical details, local versions of national events of the anti-colonial struggle (of which there is very little) and "administrative system," the last being further divided into revenue, justice and military systems or organizations with their executive authorities

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*of Middle Class in the North East* (Delhi: Uppal, 1983); Pradeep Kumar Bose, *Classes and Class Relations among Tribals in Bengal* (Delhi: Ajanta Books, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*; by the same authors, *Chhattisgarh ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas* (Kanker: Divya Prakashan, 1997); Hiralal Shukla, *History of Peoples of Bastar* (Delhi: B. R. Publication Corporation, 1978); Lala Jagdalpuria, *Bastar: Itihas Evam Sanskriti* (Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*.

of officials.<sup>60</sup> The “cultural” deals with social and economic conditions, religious beliefs, the various high and folk arts, places of tourist interest and important personalities.<sup>61</sup> This history presents the subject through the corresponding binary of political/cultural and rulers/subjects. The “political” is reduced to the apparatus of rule emanating from and centered around the king, and to a one-directional, unilateral application of this apparatus as governance on the subjects who, being immersed and locked in a hermetically sealed off, pure domain of “culture,” are passive recipients of this rule.

### **Environmental Histories and Histories of Tribal Identity**

The relatively new field of environmental history which emerged in the late 1980s through impetus from tribal peoples' movements against capitalist/state exploitation of their land and forest habitats, shows how far new histories' can continue to historicize tribal peoples without questioning the tribe/history binary.<sup>62</sup> Environmental histories came quite early and enduringly to valorize a pristine, primitive tribal identity as a counter-point to modernity. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil's *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1992) was one of the earliest and most problematic statements of this position; and one that influenced a large number of works subsequently.<sup>63</sup> Assertions of pristine ethnic identity in the context of the economic and political marginalization of tribal peoples under the post-colonial regimes of development have similarly found echo in histories of tribal groups that celebrate movements based on

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1-72.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 173-243.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>63</sup> Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

tribal identity as *adivasi* (aboriginal). Among these histories are S. C. Panchbhair's "The Jharkhand Movement among the Santhals" (1983) and A. Tirkey's *Jharkhand Movement: A Study of its Dynamics* (2002).<sup>64</sup>

Works like that of Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest* (1996), and Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity* (1998), have since provided a much more complex understanding of the relationship between tribal peoples and their environment, helping dislodge the neat formulation of primitives as ecologically prudent.<sup>65</sup> Rangarajan, for example, points to policies of forest-clearance among the Mughals as well as the British even though he argues how the policy of the British was qualitatively different from that of any regime in the pre-colonial period. He also shows how the forest peoples of central India were constructed as "uncivilized" in order to be forcibly divested of their control of forests for the sake of "improvement." In the context of wild life, Rangarajan shows how the ethic of imperial grandeur and masculinity reflected in the tradition of trophy-hunting came to stigmatize and criminalize popular hunting for survival and livelihood. Sumit Guha has demonstrated how forest communities, far from being isolated in the pre-colonial period, were adept at the optimal exploitation of the forests whose yields they both consumed and traded within the local political economy.

On the question of tribal identity, Archana Prasad's *Against Colonial Romanticism* (2003) and Vinita Damodaran's "Colonial Constructions of the "Tribe" in India: The

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<sup>64</sup> S. C. Panchbhair, "The Jharkhand Movement among the Santhals," in *Tribal Movements in India*, ed. Kumar Suresh Singh (Delhi: Manohar, 1983); Agapit Tirkey, *Jharkhand Movement: A Study of its Dynamics* (New Delhi: All India Coordinating Forum for Adivasis/Indigenous People, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860-1914* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sumit, Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Case of Chhotanagpur” (2006) have pointed out how the notion of “tribe” and “*adivasi*,” and the myth of homogeneous tribal communities, came to be established.<sup>66</sup> Prasad has demonstrated how the British forest and tribal policy managed to transform the Baigas from a group with a diversity of livelihood options into one forced to depend on shifting cultivation. Once reduced to shifting-cultivation, the original logic of the forest and tribal policy was used to divest the Baigas of any claims on the forests and in containing them within reservations. Damodaran has shown the contingent and arbitrary nature of colonial classificatory strategies and administrative policies in the marking, separation and then “tribalization” of forest peoples in the Chhotanagpur region; and the subsequent mutation of the term “tribal” into “*adivasi*.” Sumit Guha has also pointed out how the issue of “authentic indigenism” is problematic because the population identities of the sub-continent have been historically complex and fluid.<sup>67</sup> New directions provided by postcolonial scholarship in recent years have influenced these works.

### **Subaltern Studies and Other New Histories of “Tribes” in India**

Early Subaltern Studies critiqued the nationalist and Marxist histories and sought to make the peasant/tribal peoples the subject-agent of history by refusing to treat them as pre-political and by seeking to foreground their will and consciousness in the making of their history. This approach was pioneered in the writings of Ranajit Guha, most notably his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in India* (1983) is the most significant

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<sup>66</sup> Archana Prasad, *Against Colonial Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of the Anti-Modern Tribal Identity* ( New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2003); Damodaran, “Colonial Constructions of the “Tribe” in India.”

<sup>67</sup> Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, 199.

study.<sup>68</sup> There has subsequently been a strong tradition of writings on tribes in Subaltern Studies that has taken this argument forward and looked seriously at tribal consciousness, religiosity, mythic visions and bonds of community, often with an aim to understand the inner world of their cosmology. Tanika Sarkar's "Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1923-24" (1985), David Hardiman's *The Coming of the Devi* (1987) and more recently Nandini Sundar's *Subalterns and Sovereigns* (1997), are some works deriving from Guha's initial intervention.<sup>69</sup>

In "The Prose of Counter Insurgency" (1983), Guha argued that peasant/tribal rebellions were explained in dominant histories as "natural," resulting from a proclivity to "wildness," or as purely reactive, resulting from "factors of economic or political deprivation which do not relate at all to the peasant's consciousness or do so negatively...as a sort of reflex action...as an instinctive or mindless response to physical suffering...or as passive reaction to some initiative of his superordinate enemy."<sup>70</sup> Guha thus argued that "historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion."<sup>71</sup> Pointing at the religiosity that suffused peasant consciousness, Guha notes that "the notion of power that inspired it (rebellion) was made up of such ideas and expressed in such words and acts as were explicitly religious in

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<sup>68</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1983).

<sup>69</sup> Tanika Sarkar, "Jitu Santal's Movement in, 1924-32," in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on Indian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*.

<sup>70</sup> Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

character.”<sup>72</sup> He further argues that “it was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it, religion...it was a matter of both being inseparably collapsed as the signified and the signifier in the language of that massive violence.”<sup>73</sup>

In probably the most serious work on southern Chhattisgarh, Nandini Sundar follows Guha’s lead and breaks new ground but also remains trapped within certain important limitations.<sup>74</sup> Her charge is to bring “people” back into history as agents responsible for their own destiny. In order to do so, Sundar attends to “the manner in which state was constituted through the dialectics of administrative intervention and popular resistance.”<sup>75</sup> However, there are some major problems with Sundar’s approach. Firstly, she focuses only on “certain critical moments,” acts of spectacular rebellion, leaving out, as she herself admits, “everyday life...all those intervening days between birth and death, and between insurrection.”<sup>76</sup> This focus on rebellions plays out the old characterization of tribal peoples as typically rebellious.

The history of Bastar, which is marked with several significant tribal rebellions, has often been reduced to these rebellions alone and made to stand in for the histories of tribal peoples in central India as a whole. Such formulations have lent themselves easily to a stereotyping of Bastar and tribal peoples in general as perpetually and instinctively rebellious. The notion of the rebellious tribal and rebellious Bastar reinforce each other. For that reason also, historical interest in Bastar, as an example par excellence of tribal

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 12.

character and history, has been disproportionately greater in comparison to those in other tribal groups and parts of central India, like the Gonds in Kanker, that have had varied and often different socio-political formations and histories.

This inordinate focus on rebellions and on Bastar constitutes what I call the “Bastar Model,” or the tendency to stereotype Bastar as a land of rebellious primitive tribes, and to make this stereotype stand in for contiguous areas like Kanker which have distinct, if comparable, histories. In the Bastar Model if there is no spectacular rebellion the subject is not worth exploring. “Everyday” forms of political engagement, those that, as Sundar says, lie “between insurrections” and comprise the bulk of lived experience, have therefore received scant attention. In the present scenario, where the developmental state’s armed intervention in Bastar has been explained in terms of the necessity to suppress needlessly rebellious “primitive” peoples, the Bastar Model does as much harm to the cause of tribal peoples in Bastar as it does to them elsewhere. Non-spectacular, everyday, civic and creative struggles and initiatives in Bastar, which form the bulk of the engagement with the state, are thus either dismissed or seen with suspicion. This can be seen clearly in the case of Manohar Netam’s initiative on local health and medicine in Kanker. While civil engagements with the state can understandably get over-shadowed by the extreme positionality of the conflict in Bastar, the popular discourses embedded in the *anga dev* practices in Kanker offer us a chance to attend to the everyday of power and the little yet insistent struggles gathered around it.

The second major problem in Sundar’s monograph on Bastar is the limited and historicist use of the popular archive of what she calls “village histories” and a somewhat



misplaced focus on telling the past “as it was.”<sup>77</sup> This makes her repeat another well-established historians’ habit of reducing the understanding of tribal rebellions to an explanation of rationalized “causes” rather than locating rebellions fully within popular consciousness.<sup>78</sup> Though Sundar begins by hoping to foreground “changing popular notions of kingship and polity,”<sup>79</sup> by her own admission, it is only for the pre-colonial past that she mines “non-linear and local modes of history telling.”<sup>80</sup> For the colonial and post-colonial periods, it is the (official) “archives that provide the narrative structure.”<sup>81</sup> This neat correspondence between pre-colonial/colonial-post-colonial and oral/written archive is problematic.

In this same vein, Sundar finds a distinction between “history” (factual, called *katav*) and “story” (non-factual, called *dugga*) in popular Dhuruwa accounts too quickly.<sup>82</sup> Though she is mindful of the “different modes of historical reconstructions” involved in oral and written narratives, she does not explore the implications of the distinction between historical and non-historical modes of accounting for the past to its logical end for her own narrative.<sup>83</sup> It soon becomes evident that Sundar is mainly interested in “history,” an interest that closes off most of the oral accounts as non-

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>78</sup> Banerjee, *The Politics of Time*, 1-39.

<sup>79</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, xi.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> One of the tribes of Bastar.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

historical even when it is clear that such a distinction is non-sustainable for the purpose of exploring tribal consciousness and subjectivity.

Sundar's history therefore does not fully embrace the terms on which the village histories are constructed and the implications this might have on her narrative. She remains tied to a rationalized presentation of "what actually happened," the primary condition for the historical validity of an account.<sup>84</sup> Even the chapter on pre-colonial history, the only one to which Dhuruwa oral accounts provide some "structure" in Sundar's narrative, is devoted to a detailing of the secular issues of lineage origin, migration, settlement, labor organization, cultivation, forest use, markets and trade and not to what the imagination of a "deified" landscape implies for the idea of secular history in the first place.<sup>85</sup> Despite gestures at acknowledging history as a particular construction of the past and the validity of Dhuruwa accounts as alternative constructions of the past, Sundar in the end prefers the illusory securities of a positivist narrative.

The key problem in histories like Sundar's was highlighted by Dipesh Chakrabarty when, in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), he pointed out that though keen to give tribal consciousness its place in history, such works faced an interpretive hurdle when it came to giving tribal accounts explanatory powers or agency equal to the rational modern. The accounts of the past that such Left-wing radical histories encountered among the tribal peoples "developed a degree of intractability with respect to the aims of the professional historian."<sup>86</sup> As Chakrabarty argues in his analysis of Guha's treatment of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 21-46.

<sup>86</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 101.

the Santal (tribal) rebel's statement that he rebelled because he had been asked to do so by his *thakur* (god), it was possible to understand this as tribal belief but impossible to give the Santal's god the same agency that could be given to the Santal.<sup>87</sup> The Santal's account was unable to fulfill the cardinal rule of history, that the account be rationally defensible.<sup>88</sup> So even when Guha acknowledges that "it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as a religious consciousness," he is also quick add "except, that is, as a massive self-estrangement...which made the rebels look upon their project as predicated on a will other than their own."<sup>89</sup> Chakrabarty adds that the Santal's expressions have to be "anthropologized," "converted into some one else's, in this case the primitive's belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis" and never be history's own.<sup>90</sup>

Chakrabarty's critique of Guha applied as well to the other studies of tribal politics/rebellions discussed above. None of these have investigated why tribal consciousness, despite its autonomy and political character, does not quite enter historical narratives on its own terms. As Chakrabarty puts it, "when we do minority histories within the democratic project of including all groups within history, we both hear and anthropologize the Santal at the same time...we cannot write history from within what

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 102-6; The Santals, or Santhals, were a tribal group who rebelled against the British and non-tribal Indians in colonial Bengal and Bihar.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 98-100.

<sup>89</sup> Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 34.

<sup>90</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 105.

we regard as their beliefs...we thus produce good, not subversive histories, which conform to the protocols of the discipline.”<sup>91</sup>

Chakrabarty has pointed out that “subaltern pasts,” or those accounts which are not rationally defensible, and the practice of historicization, are not mutually exclusive: it is in fact the first that makes the second possible.<sup>92</sup> It is because history already has intimations of other ways of being, of the enchanted, of the plural and heterogeneous world we inhabit, that it is able to historicize. What happens, asks Chakrabarty, if we acknowledge this:

We can – and we do usually in writing history – treat the Santal...as the signifier of other times and societies. This gesture maintains the subject-object relationship between the historian and the evidence. In this gesture the past remains genuinely dead; the historian brings it “alive” by telling the story. But the Santal with his statement “I did as my god told me to do” also faces us as a way of being in this world, and we could ask ourselves: Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for the way we define our present? Does the Santal help us understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances? This question does not historicize or anthropologize the Santal, for the illustrative power of the Santal as an example does not depend on his otherness. Here the Santal stands as our contemporary, and the subject-object relationship that normally defines the historian’s relationship to his or her archives is dissolved in this gesture.<sup>93</sup>

According to Chakrabarty therefore, the historian needs to refuse to historicize in order to bring to the fore the irreducible plurality of time, a “disjuncture of the present with itself.”<sup>94</sup> Although this will remain an extremely complicated task, subaltern pasts allow us to show this disjuncture, to perform the “limits of history,”<sup>95</sup> to make visible this

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 107.

plural, heterogeneous time even if this leads to a crisis of history's constitutive assumptions.<sup>96</sup>

In his *Hybrid Histories* (1999), following Chakrabarty, Ajay Skaria asks for a "provincialization of history" in relation to subaltern pasts.<sup>97</sup> Juxtaposing history and memory, the former the site of the nation and state, the latter of subaltern pasts, Skaria argues that "memory...is not about lack...(but is) a site for those narratives which potentially challenge the hyper-real Europe, it is the moment of the naming of this challenge as lack."<sup>98</sup> More than orality, where the oral can be potentially historical, it is subaltern memory like that of the tribal peoples which is seen in history as mythic and therefore as anti-historical. While the inscription of the oral is not necessarily seen as transformational, the "advance" from memory to history is seen in history as a distinctly modern sensibility, where one moves from ignorance into knowledge. Skaria points to the "myth" of history as after memory, and speaks of history as only a certain kind of memory.<sup>99</sup> Skaria thus positions tribal memory alongside historical memory.

In *Remembering Partition* (2001), Gyanendra Pandey similarly points to the problem in any stark separation of history and memory, to the mythic qualities of history itself, and to history's embeddedness in the narrative of the nation-state.<sup>100</sup> Pandey argues that even when history takes its rhetoric of reflexivity seriously, it remains, consciously

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>97</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>99</sup> "Myth" here meaning commonsense.

<sup>100</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, History and Nationalism in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8-9.

or unconsciously, implicated in the political project of modern science and the nation state, and in myth-making.<sup>101</sup> In *How Societies Remember* (1989), Paul Connerton has written about history's claim to be able to "extract" the past from the present through protocols of evidence and verification, and therefore of its purported superiority over social memory.<sup>102</sup> He then argues that history is itself politically implicated in the narrative of the nation and of state. "Mythocentrism,"<sup>103</sup> or the affirmation of memory vis-à-vis history, and of history itself as memory, thus becomes central to an attention to subaltern pasts as legitimate modes of the past, the condition for what Chakrabarty calls for and Skaria describes as "hybrid histories."<sup>104</sup>

In his work on alternate conceptions of wildness among the Dangi tribal peoples of western India, Skaria reads *goths*, stories that involve spirits, gods and goddesses, that the Dangis tell themselves and others, as "a legitimate way of understanding pasts, to formulate questions of the professional historian by taking cues from the *goths*, and to attempt hybrid, contrapuntal narratives that bring together, necessarily inconstantly and incompletely, the concerns of the Dangi narrator and professional historians."<sup>105</sup> Hybrid histories are those that, according to Skaria, "are best understood as simultaneously

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>102</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Wiltshire: Cambridge University Press), 1-16.

<sup>103</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, 12.

<sup>104</sup> Here it would do good to remember the White-Ricoeur discussion on the nature of history and literature around questions of narrativity, knowledge and truth in the context of the question of the knowledge claims of historical practice, though the question that confronts us here is about different constructions of the past and the imperiousness of history in de-legitimizing non-modern and/or non-western understandings of the past. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973); and Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

<sup>105</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, 1.

produced by constant engagement with hyper-real Europe and by proceeding beyond it.”<sup>106</sup> The *goths*, and other subaltern pasts, writes Skaria, are already hybrid, always in negotiation with the historical that is never hegemonic. So by allowing the *goths* to interrupt the professional historians’ narrative, we effect the hybridization of history itself. Memory here serves as the site of plural imaginings, a surplus that exceeds the particular discursivity of any construction.

While Chakrabarty and Skaria consider this to be a radical challenging of history, they are quick to point out the errors in construing the site of memory as “infrastructural,” as a pristine space, a voice recovered or an always radical politics, all of which could easily result from a simplistic understanding of recuperation, of an affirmation of difference.<sup>107</sup> Hybrid histories are therefore envisaged as a continuing search for irreducible heterogeneity, of unending journeys across and beyond the gaze of the authoring and authorizing hyper-real Europe and its universals, including history.

### **Historians’ Construction of the “State”**

In the histories of princely polities in colonial India, the corollary of the culturization of tribal peoples is the attribution of sovereign power and authority to the princely “state.” In this formulation, even when the people are recovered as agential,<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>108</sup> For people’s histories, among others see Mridula Mukherjee, “Peasant Movement in Patiala State,” *Studies in History* 1, No. 1 (1979): 215; James Manor, *Political Change in an Indian State: Mysore, 1917-55* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1977); Robin Jeffrey, ed., *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi: OUP, 1978); Barbara Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: The Dissolution of a Patron Client System, 1914-39* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978); Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917-47* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Majid Siddiqi, “History and Society in a Popular Rebellion: Mewat, 1920-33,” *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 28, No. 3 (1986): 442; Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa, 1920-50*

sovereignty is still a matter of the balance of power between the colonial and princely regimes<sup>109</sup> who occupy the domain of a reified, pre-given “state.” This “state” appears in opposition to the people who, constructed and separated out as “subjects,” are merely reactive, their terms never shaping the sovereign domain of the “state.” Even in histories that speak of how the ruling regime legitimates itself by the adoption of local practices, the determining principle and overall framework of the polity is always that of the rulers.<sup>110</sup> Princely regimes, mostly seen as a hybrid of traditional and modern principles of rule, remain framed within the dominant Brahmin-Kshatriya and/or the colonial-modern discourses.<sup>111</sup> The histories of princely polities have rarely attempted to question the universality and naturalness of the idea of the “state” and to unravel and disaggregate the “languages of stateness”<sup>112</sup> – the statist archive and other rational registers through which the “state” attempts its own realization – through which the “effect”<sup>113</sup> of the “state” is produced.

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(New Delhi: Manohar, 1993); Hira Singh, *Colonial Hegemony and Popular Resistance: Princes, Peasants and Paramount Power* (New Delhi: Sage, 1998); Y. Vaikuntham, ed., *Peoples' Movements in the Princely States* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004).

<sup>109</sup> For a long time the princely states were seen as puppets of the colonial regime, and as stultified feudal polities that moved only when goaded by a modernizing colonial regime. For writings dealing with princes as agential, among others, see Barbara Ramusack, “Punjab States: Maharajas and Gurudwaras - Patiala and the Sikh Community,” in Jeffrey, *People, Princes and Paramount Power*; Joan L. Erdman, *Patrons and Performers in Rajasthan: The Subtle Tradition* (Delhi: Chanakya, 1985); Manu Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>110</sup> Ernst and Pati, *India's Princely States*.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, eds., *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>113</sup> John Harriss, *Power Matters: Essays on Institutions, Politics and Society in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 196.



Because the history of princely polities has always been marginal to British India-centric historical and historiographical fields, and scholarly focus on them has been sporadic and short,<sup>114</sup> the more sophisticated literature of recent decades on state formation has not yet impacted their study sufficiently.<sup>115</sup> This literature deals with, among other things, the dominating influence of the experiences and constructions of European state formation on understandings of polity in the colonies<sup>116</sup>, the foundational relationship between history and “state” and history as essentially the prose of the “state.”<sup>117</sup>

That histories in general rely inordinately on statist records which are part of the practices that produce the effects of the “state” has meant that princely histories too remain trapped in the prose of stateness, unable to see beyond the objectifying and rationalist discourse of territory, law, administration, revenue, police and other governmental practices. Histories of “princely states” have thus hardly attended to popular perceptions of polity, to local, vernacular and emic understandings of sovereign power and authority.<sup>118</sup> What new histories of “state”<sup>119</sup> point to is the need for us to

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<sup>114</sup> Ernst and Pati, *India's Princely States*, 1-14.

<sup>115</sup> For recent writings on state and sovereignty see Blom Hansen and Stepputat, *States of Imagination*; edited by the same authors, *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005); also Harris, *Power Matters*, 193-211. In South Asian historiography, works that take a complex and nuanced position on the question of “state” are Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition*.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Pandey, *Remembering Partition*.

<sup>118</sup> Rare examples of histories that do are Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); also by the same author, “Kings versus Bandits: Anti-Colonialism in a Bandit Narrative,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 13 (Third Series), No.3 (2003), 315; and to some extent Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*.

critique the idea of the “state” as a given, natural and universal category; and to disaggregate this category to mark the historically and culturally contingent and specific constructions of polities without generalizations and pre-conceived models.<sup>120</sup> The *anga dev* accounts present us with the opportunity to explore one such counter-discourse of polity that has typically been dismissed as “irrational” and “esoteric.”

### **The Project**

My project draws from the new histories, especially late Subaltern Studies, which have attempted to question the notion of tribe/primitive by pointing to the politics of history itself as a knowledge practice. Moving away from positivist-objectivist history and its narratives of transition, the discussions in these revisionist histories have focused attention on the historical-anthropological construction of the category of the tribe/primitive and the implications this carries for the representation of tribes in history. They have attempted to work out the theoretical grounds for listening to tribal accounts as alternate accounts of the past by looking at questions of historical representation, rationality, temporality and memory. To be sure these accounts are informed by history but constitute an alternative to the rational-historical in their hybridity. Since the othering of tribal peoples as “primitive” in history-anthropology is a political act, the attention to *anga dev* accounts as political becomes a necessary counter-practice in contesting that act.

I would like to argue that if the construction of the tribe/primitive is effected through the linear, homogeneous, secular-rational time in and of history, a radical move

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<sup>119</sup> Blom Hansen and Stepputat, *States of Imagination*.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 1-38.

would be to foreground the irreducible plurality of times in which the *anga dev* accounts are located, and an attempt to give them free play alongside and in excess of disciplinary history. In seeking to do this, I will explore the manner in which, without the luxury of the historical pretense of linear, homogeneous and secular-rational time, the *anga dev* accounts negotiate the imperious pretenses of modernity and history: this I hope will bring into focus the imbrications of time that we straighten in the interest of our narratives of progress and development.

The *anga dev* accounts do not exist in a pristine, originary site but are informed by history, where they share in the historical characterization of their past. Yet in their accounts the distinctions between “our” time and “their” time, the time of the “state” and the time of the spirit, dissolve. The separation of the “state” and the “people,” of the “political” and the “religious,” of the “divine” and “human,” of the “rational” and “irrational,” the “tangible” and the “intangible,” “tribe” and “Hindu/caste” is called into question. In studying these constructions my project therefore attempts to inhabit the terrain of the inextricable inter-penetration of time, from which the *anga dev* accounts are compelled to work and negotiate, in order to ask what other pasts and therefore presents and futures come into view in these accounts.

I wish to gesture not only to the plural times and hetero-temporality, in which the *difference* of temporality is the main issue. I wish also to suggest the inextricable *entanglements* of time that is our – the tribal peoples’ and the historian’s – shared temporality, something which the historical conception of time necessarily subordinates in order to privilege certain presumed ways of being over others. As Chakrabarty has

pointed out, reason and disenchantment are not the only principles we live by.<sup>121</sup> In fact it is because we have experience of that which we call “enchanted” that we can claim to “disenchant” our world. The historian’s distinction between “our” and “their” time is fictitious. To think of history as a practice of time belonging to the present and the *anga dev* accounts as one belonging to the past, as happens in dominant discourses, is to fail to acknowledge that history creates this distinction as its condition of being and superiority in the first place.

Yet the power of history is always uncertain, unstable and fragile. History is therefore never able to fully suppress the insistent differences of the politics of the subaltern it seeks to overcome. The tribal political, for example, remains a stubborn element in our times. I therefore conceive of the location of the *anga dev* accounts and this project as one of *trans-temporality*,<sup>122</sup> a location across and through enmeshed temporalities where no temporality can be reduced to any other. The world of the *anga dev* is informed by historical time but not limited to it. In the accounts I listen to and the account I consequently fashion, rajas, gods, ancestral spirits and colonial officials constitute one world. Such a location allows us to critique the certitudes of rational-historical temporality and posit the contemporaneity of political difference. I as historian and raja centrally embody this location even as my doubts, discomfiture and struggles to inhabit this temporality are a testimony to the power as well as the opacity of disciplinary history.

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<sup>121</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 11-12.

<sup>122</sup> I develop this term from J. N. Mohanty’s “trans-culturality” in *The Self and The Other*, 36-37; and from my discussion about “inter-temporality” with Gyanendra Pandey.

I will primarily concentrate on oral accounts, using bodily and spatial practices mentioned above as supplementary. The past is clearly marked in the oral accounts. In the case of bodily and spatial practices, the past is evoked only in relation to the oral. While recognizing that the *anga dev* practices are located in a much larger cosmos and repertoire of practices, which I will elaborate, I center my study on the *anga dev* as the foci of interlocation as it is through them that the state, as symbolized by the raja, other state functionaries and institutions, and their claims to power, is most closely apprehended and engaged. The *anga dev*, as the pre-eminent royalist tribal practice in Kanker today, offer an unmatched site from which to study popular constructions of the relationship between rulers and ruled.

In looking at constructions of rule and subject-hood in the *anga dev* accounts, I want to focus on the questions of power, authority and sovereignty, or polity, as these are worked out through the relationship between various actors in these accounts. Here I move away from the idea of the “state” as polity, and from the equation of “state” with sovereign power and authority. I expand the gaze out from the traditional, narrow focus on the raja and his functionaries, the ruling elite, princely institutions and administration, and colonial officials and disciplines. I go beyond law, taxes, police and the official records in which they are written of, beyond these languages and practices of stateness. In other words in this project there is no natural, already known “state” whose destiny I dutifully chart from its own pronouncements.

Instead I begin to piece together at least the outlines of another construction of polity from an attention to the regimes of power involving gods, ancestral spirits, rajas, *angrez* (the British) and the *bhumkal* spoken of in the *anga dev* accounts. I see the *anga*

*dev* constructions of the past and the practices they are embedded in as a site where sovereign power and authority is contingent and continuously being fashioned and re-fashioned through engagement and negotiation. Sovereign power and authority is divided, shared and contested. Away from the rationalizing, secularizing, objectifying and reductive gaze of the “state,” sovereign power and authority take on different forms and meaning and are difficult to pin down and settle. I attend to the ineffable, ungraspable textures of power, the aura and majesty of its cosmic play, and hope to at least intimate its contours and stay with its irreducibility.

The present project may be described as one of cultural or anthropological history. It is concerned with the ways in which pasts are constructed through oral, bodily and spatial practices of the *anga dev*. It is about present-day discursive struggles to claim the past in order to reflect on the present. The project is an ethnography of politics, a study of how the political is constituted in popular consciousness, beliefs and practices.

In the title of my project, following the debates around the idea of the “state” in recent decades pointed out earlier, I use the term “State Effects”<sup>123</sup> that is, to the “state” as a claim or claims to power that are articulated, negotiated and challenged continuously. By the coupling and juxtaposition of “Spirits, State Effects, Peoples’ Politics,” I first de-center the notion of the “state” in relation to its “other” as symbolized by the “spirit.” I also to point to the contestation and scattering of power beyond any neat consolidation of it in the dominant, reified and reductive notion of the “state” by the political assertions of the peoples of Kanker, populations which statist records construct as passive “subjects” of rule, those who in the alternative visions of polity in the *anga dev*

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<sup>123</sup> Harriss, *Power Matters*, 193-97.

practices and accounts of the past claim a central role in the shaping of the polity. I do not wish to reify the category of “people,” hence “peoples,” and in the course of this essay, I disaggregate and nuance this term by looking at different notions of community, the hierarchies that constitute them and the conflicts that mark their interaction. I also show how distinctions between the categories of ancestral and non-ancestral deities, the raja and the people often dissolve in the world of the *anga dev*.

The dating of the project, “20<sup>th</sup> Century,” needs explanation. My study is not a chronological history of Kanker in the last century, nor a discussion of accounts given in this span of time. As I will argue, the *anga dev* accounts are in any case not necessarily structured according to a strict linear time and chronology. The time of all the ancestors is often compounded and projected into the time of the living and vice-versa. The idea of the raja often cuts across and conflates particular rajas and events, sometimes harking back to the pre-colonial period. The colonial-princely regime I write about refers to a political entity, centering on the raja, whose primacy came to an end in 1947-48; but the popular perceptions of this regime and its power extend forward and backward in unexpected ways. “20<sup>th</sup> Century” is therefore a convenient marker, a kind of holding point for the colonial-princely polity that the statist records “produced” in the 1940s and that popular accounts construct quite differently; but whose antecedents and afterlife cannot be contained within it. Popular conceptions of the raja’s power in the present day draw from pre-colonial as well as very recent developments. The chapters that follow should illustrate this clearly.

In the chapter that follows the present discussion of historiography, I look at the archives produced by the rulers of princely Kanker, archives that would traditionally be

acceptable within disciplinary history: colonial anthropological compendia about “primitive subjects” and records of the colonial-princely administration about the “princely state.” Firstly, I study the ways in which colonial anthropological writings on Bastar, and by extension Kanker, portray tribal societies. Most administrator-anthropologists in the colonial period, who wanted to collect information about “primitive” peoples in this region to facilitate the tasks of guardianly colonial-princely rule, concentrated on tribal peoples in the neighboring princely state of Bastar and extended their understanding of these peoples to the peoples in Kanker. I look at the ways in which this body of literature culturizes tribal peoples through the separation of kingly polity from tribal society. I closely follow the manner in which the phenomenon of the *anga dev* is described in this literature.

Secondly, I also explore the ways in which the documentary records of the colonial-princely administration produce the “state” and its “subjects” through languages of stateness, and in the process un-archive the politically recalcitrant popular elements of the polity. Finally I look at a set of statist documents called *igrarnama* in which the “state’s” dealings with the *anga dev* phenomenon are recorded and sought to be rationalized in the language of modern law even as the intractable nature of the *anga dev* practices resist such a containment. The purpose of this chapter is to point to the constructions of polity contained in the old archive and the gaps and erasures that inhere in these constructions; and therefore to the need to mine *anga dev* practices and accounts as an alternative archive for the constructions of polity in princely Kanker.

In the next chapter (Ch. 4), I offer some general reflections on my fieldwork and ethnography, look at the implications of my double location in the project as raja and



historian-ethnographer, and discuss the nature of the *anga dev* accounts of the past. In the fifth chapter, I explore the world of the *anga dev*, its realms of power centered around ancestral and non-ancestral forces, notions of community and its various hierarchies based on age, gender, ritual role, old and newer politico-economic positions and processes. These realms and their relations of power also constituted the field of forces in which I conducted my study and the terrain on which the *anga dev* accounts of the past are embedded. Here I pay special attention to the cosmology of the *anga dev* to study the meanings and forms of power, authority and sovereignty.

The sixth chapter delves into the *anga dev* accounts of the past to investigate the ways in which sovereign power and authority obtain in the relationship between the rulers and the peoples constructed by these accounts. I narrate and analyze accounts gathered from my participation in events that occurred and conversations that happened in them in the course of two years of fieldwork. Here I analyze the ways in which the raja's sovereign claims are apprehended and engaged with in these accounts. The seventh and final chapter presents some tentative conclusions.

### **About Kanker**

To understand the location and imperatives of this project, it is necessary to begin with a short introduction to the peoples, land and rulers of the princely and present district of Kanker because neither is well known in historical studies. The princely state of Kanker comprised the larger part (3706 sq. kms.)<sup>124</sup> of the present eponymous district

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<sup>124</sup> *Annual Administrative Report for Kanker State* (henceforth AAR), 1941-42, IOR, V/10/1368, London: British Library, 1.

(5285 sq. kms.),<sup>125</sup> which lies to the south of Raipur, the capital of the state of Chhattisgarh. Lying between the latitudes 20°-6' and 20°-34' North and the longitudes 80°-41' and 81°-48' East, princely Kanker was bordered on the south by the princely state of Bastar, in the west and north by Central Provinces and in the east by the princely states and province of Orissa.<sup>126</sup>



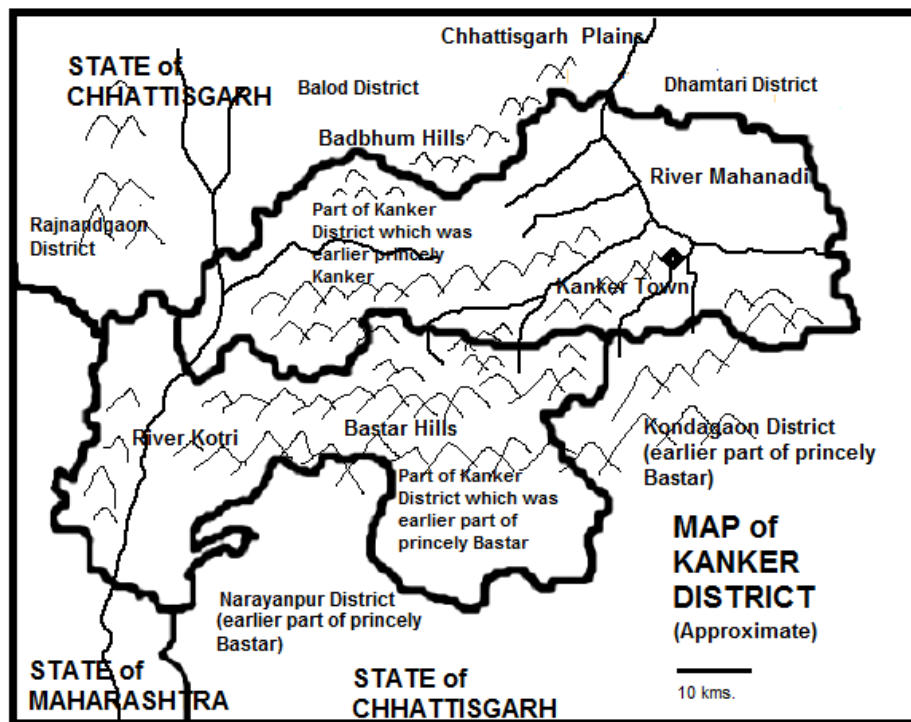
Map 1. State of Chhattisgarh and the district of Kanker<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> “About Kanker,” *North Bastar-Kanker District Administration official website*, <http://kanker.gov.in/> (accessed November 30, 2012).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> I have prepared all the maps used.

In Kanker, the gradient of the land slopes gently north-eastwards down from the outcrop of the Abujhmar hills (part of the Bastar Hills system) in the south-west, turning the River Mahanadi, which originating in Sihawa (within princely Kanker) and first flows north-west wards, to a north-easterly direction towards Orissa (see Map 2. on the following page). Several streams that drain from the Bastar Hills along this slope eventually become tributaries to the Mahanadi. There is often an error in considering the Kanker district as part of Bastar. Though, as mentioned above, princely Kanker and princely Bastar were formed into one district in the period 1948-2000 and continue to be part of one Commissionerate, and though historically, geographically and demographically these two territories have much in common, a nuanced approach, which recognizes connections yet marks difference, is required.



Map 2. Kanker District

The Kanker district has a mixed hill and plain topography comprising a middle transitional region between the central Chhattisgarh plains of the River Mahanadi to the north and the hills and plateaus of Bastar to the south. Its landscape comprises scattered hills and rock formations, and sparse or degraded forests cut by swathes of cultivated land so that the people make their life in a mixed forest-agrarian eco-system. The forests are of a mixed deciduous type with *saja*, *sal* (*Shorea robusta*), *teak* (*Tectona grandis*), *bamboo* (*Bambusoideae*), *bija* (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), *tendu* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), *mahua* (*Madhuca longifolia*), *harra* (*Terminalia chebula*) and *bhirra* (*Meliaceae*) being the preponderant varieties of trees.<sup>128</sup> On the floor of the forest grow a bewildering variety of herbal plants. These forests are a source of timber and non-timber products of local significance of the kind mentioned earlier in Netam's account and are also of great commercial value.

Though forest products became the main source of revenue for the princely state in the 1940s and their scientific management was the cause of some strain in the state's relationship with the people, it is only after 1947, when the Forest Department's working plans were steadily extended to cover most of the district's forests that the signs of conflict over their control and use has become remarkable (Netam's initiative is an example of this response).<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> T. C. Sur, *Working Plan for the Kanker Forest Division, Raipur Circle, Madhya Pradesh for the years 1958-59 to 1972-73, Volume I* (Bhopal: Alok Press, 1974).

<sup>129</sup> AAR, 1944-45 and 1945-46, V/IOR/ 1371-72, London: British Library, 34-35, 32; Sur, *Working Plan*, 4.

The Kanker district is rich in minerals like iron-ore, quartzite, granite, garnet, kinite and gold.<sup>130</sup> There was virtually no state-related or commercial mining of these minerals in the time of the princely state. Only recently have proposals been mooted by the government for their commercial extraction, and the consequent move to build a railway line to reach these deposits has been the cause of much controversy. This controversy stems from popular perceptions both of the damage this might do to local ecology and way of life as well as the selective benefits this might bring to powerful groups of actors like the outside mining, industrial and trading corporations. In both these cases, of forests and minerals, the region of Bastar has historically seen a more large scale, intensive and continuous extraction, which has been the reason for several open and violent conflicts between the people and princely and post-colonial states.<sup>131</sup>

The population of Kanker in 1941-42 was 1,49,471 and there were 564 villages.<sup>132</sup> Today the population of the Kanker district is 7,48,593<sup>133</sup> and it has 995 villages.<sup>134</sup> Fifty six percent of the population of the Kanker district is identified as Scheduled Tribes.<sup>135</sup> It is possible that this large tribal population is the result of the addition of former areas of princely Bastar to the Kanker district because the proportion of tribal population to the total is greater in Bastar. But even though this might be the

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<sup>130</sup> "Resources and Economy," *North Bastar-Kanker District Administration official website*.

<sup>131</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*; Anderson and Huber, *The Hour of the Fox*.

<sup>132</sup> *AAR, 1941-42*, 5.

<sup>133</sup> *Census of India, 2011, Provisional Report, Paper I, Series 23, Chhattisgarh* (New Delhi: Geeta Offset, 2011), 26.

<sup>134</sup> "Statistical Profile," *North Bastar-Kanker District Administration official website*.

<sup>135</sup> *Report of the Task Group on Development of Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes, Annexure I.5*, Delhi: Planning Commission, Govt. of India, 2005, 16, [www.planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/taskforce/inter/inter\\_sts.pdf](http://www.planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/taskforce/inter/inter_sts.pdf) (accessed March 23, 2012).

case, and taking the post-1947 and then post-2000 influx of non-tribal government and business related population into Kanker, it would not be wrong to say that the majority population of the princely state was tribal: this population is larger in the villages.

Most of this tribal population has in colonial and post-colonial administrative classification been described as “Gond,” a tribe that is scattered in various pockets of a large territory stretching from the northern area of the former Madras Presidency in southern India to Gujarat in the western India.<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, while the Gonds in Bastar are recognized as divided into sub-groups, the Gonds in Kanker, a diverse range of groups, differing in many respects, are mentioned only as “Gonds,” a summary and problematic description in the first place.<sup>137</sup>

The social formations and history of the Kanker Gonds differ greatly even from that of their closest Gond neighbors in the remaining four districts of southern Chhattisgarh, which together comprised the princely state of Bastar. The practices of the *anga dev*, identified in colonial anthropological literature as “log-gods”<sup>138</sup> of the Gonds in Kanker and Bastar, though they are connected, seem to be of different political salience in relation to the respective princely states. Though the appellation Gond is used by the people described as Gonds in several contexts, other names, relating to sub-groups, are more common. The Kanker Gonds speak Chhattisgarhi and Hindi, and write in Hindi, both of which contain a fair number of Gondi definitional terms. This is also then the language of the majority caste population of the district of Kanker today, among what we

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<sup>136</sup> W. V. Grigson, *The Maria Gonds of Bastar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

<sup>137</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 12-16.

<sup>138</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 198.

would call lower agrarian castes, described in governmental categories as Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Castes who live inter-mixed with the tribal population. These mixed tribe-caste villages show a degree of socio-cultural overlap, including in their participation in the practices of the *anga dev.* that would throw the neat separation of the categories of tribe and caste into doubt,

The kingdom of Kanker came under British control in 1818 after the Marathas, who had effectively controlled it until then, were defeated.<sup>139</sup> Thereafter, over changes in the precise structure of control over a century leading up to the 1940s, the “feudatory chieftaincy of Kanker” or “Kanker State” as it was officially designated, was put in “political relation” with the Crown via the Crown Representative, Political Agent of the Chhattisgarh State and the Resident of the Eastern States.<sup>140</sup> The kings of Kanker claimed to be from the Rajput Chandravansh lineage that had ruled Kanker since A.D.1385.<sup>141</sup> In the colonial period, there were five “feudatory chiefs” or rajas, Bhup Deo (1802-39), Padum Deo (1839-53), Narharideo (1853-1903), Komal Deo (1903-25) and Bhanu Pratap Deo (1925-48).<sup>142</sup> Bhanu Pratap Deo’s son Udai Pratap Deo, my father, was recognized as the ex-ruler of Kanker until 1971. It is to the records of the regime over which these kings presided, which claimed the status of a “state,” that I turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>139</sup> AAR, 1941-42, 1.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 79-80.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 55-145.

### Chapter 3

#### The Archive of “State” and “Subjects” in Princely Kanker

In this chapter, I examine the “traditional” archive of princely Kanker to study the ways in which the rulers and the Gond peoples, and the relationships between them, are described in it. By “traditional” I refer to that which would be acceptable within the rationalist protocols of disciplinary history. I argue that this archive, comprising the writings of colonial administrator-anthropologists and administrative records of the colonial-princely administration, produced the polity as a “state” restricted to the ruling strata, and the people as “primitive subjects,” separated from each other, with designated roles of ruler-ship and subject-hood.<sup>143</sup> The “state,” comprising princely rulers, colonial and princely officials and various “modern” institutions and practices of governance that they jointly worked, was marked off in this archive as the sphere of the “historical-political,” and this “state” was given complete guardianship of the “primitive subjects” who, because they were described as living in a static and backward society, were deemed to have little or no experience of the “political.” In this construction, sovereign power and authority lay with the “state”: the people were wholly excluded from it.

I argue that such archival constructions were part of the practices of rule employed by the princely and colonial rulers and were meant to create the effect of an all-powerful “state,” and pacified and ordered “subjects.” I also explore the structure and content of this archive, and the gaps and erasures that inhere in it. I attend to the process of archiving and simultaneously “un-archiving,” in which the politically recalcitrant

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<sup>143</sup> I discuss the relationship between the colonial and princely regime in detail later in the chapter. Though it is important to mark the distinction between the colonial and princely regimes, I use the compound “colonial-princely” to mark the joint state-building projects of the colonial and princely regimes, which laid claims to the domain of the “state.”



popular elements were silenced, rendered illegible or trivialized as quaint “culture.”<sup>144</sup> This examination opens up the domain of the political, sought to be resolved and closed off through the notion of the “state,” as a space where other, popular, un-state-like regimes of power, with forms and meanings very different from that of the “rational” realm of the “state,” are intimidated. In this reading, sovereign power and authority appear to be divided, shared and contested not just between the colonial and princely regimes, but also between them and the regimes of ancestral and non-ancestral deities, local communities and *panchayats* (local institutions of self-government).

Colonial administrator-anthropologists worked diligently to collect information about the “primitive” peoples of this region because they thought that such information was critical for the successful administrative guardianship of these “subjects,” the responsibility of the civilizing and improving “state.” They focused on the peoples of the larger and more significant neighboring princely state of Bastar and applied their conclusions to the peoples of Kanker who they found to be closely related to the peoples in Bastar. In describing them as “primitives,” the colonial administrator-anthropologists separated the people from “politics,” an attribute that they reserved for the colonial-princely administration and its personnel. The society of the “primitive” was discussed as quaint and esoteric “culture” and “primitive religion,” self-contained and inward-looking, its power relations being inconsequential to the “state” and to “politics.” I pay attention to the ways in which the phenomenon of the *anga dev* is depicted in these writings, especially as an aspect of “primitive religion.” I also however mark the rare ambivalence in these writings regarding the marking of aspects of tribal life as political even if the

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<sup>144</sup> For a formulation of the “un-archived” see Gyanendra Pandey, “Un-archived Histories: The “Mad” and the “Trifling”,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII, No. 1 (2012): 37.

political/cultural, state/primitive binaries were never seriously questioned by these administrator-anthropologists.

After looking at the writings of colonial administrator-anthropologists, I explore the administrative records of the colonial-princely regime that comprise the prose of the “state,” the language of stateness, through which the regime represented itself. I look at the annual administrative records of the colonial-princely regime, the various communications between colonial and princely officials, land records and revenue manuals to outline the projections of “state.” In these records, the “political” and the “historical” were firmly claimed for the “state” and wrapped away in its logic. While the colonial and princely regimes, sometimes distinct and at other times joined, occupy the domain of the “state,” the people, as “subjects,” appear in this archive as passive objects of rule. The *anga dev* practices find no mention at all. By exploring the gaps and inconsistencies in these records, I point to the suppression of a much wider realm of the political, one that went beyond, was meant to be superseded by and therefore was not acknowledged in the regime of these records.

At the end I turn to a set of statist documents called the *iqrarnama* dealing especially with the *anga dev* phenomenon but whose position in the colonial-princely regime’s archive was uncertain for reasons that are critical to this study: I discuss these later in this chapter. This uncertain archival status of the *iqrarnama*, both in relation to properly statist self-representational documents, and its form and content, I will argue, suggests the colonial-princely regime’s acknowledgement of “un-state-like” power and sovereignty with which it was forced to transact. It also demonstrates the process through which the *anga dev* phenomenon was sought to be rationalized in the language of modern

law. Eventually, the purpose of this chapter is to underline the interested nature and limitations of the traditional archive and the need to attend to the *anga dev* practices and accounts as an alternative archive for this study.

### **Colonial Anthropology and the “Primitive” in Bastar-Kanker**

The subject peoples of the larger and more significant princely regime of Bastar provided the main material for writing about “tribal” and by extension “primitive” peoples of the region of southern Chhattisgarh. The majority subject population of Kanker, which was similarly termed “tribal” and recognized as “primitive” at this time, figured only marginally in this literature, and conclusions made for Bastar were invariably applied to them, including the blanket application of the tribe name “Gond” for all tribal peoples in southern Chhattisgarh. The most comprehensive and influential ethnographies of the Gonds of southern Chhattisgarh can be found in W. V. Grigson’s *The Maria Gonds of Bastar* (1938) and Verrier Elwin’s *The Muria and their Ghotul* (1947) and the following discussion will thus focus primarily on them.<sup>145</sup>

Before Grigson and Elwin, the large number of colonial officials who had traveled to and through southern Chhattisgarh from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards had left only short and episodic accounts of the Gonds. These officials who had interacted with the Gonds with different briefs ranging from exploration in the earliest instances to administrative intervention of various kinds later, included Captain J. T. Blunt (1795), Major P. Vans Agnew (1818-1825), R. Jenkins (1818), Col. McPherson (1852), Major Charles Elliot (1856-57), Col. Hogg (1859), Captain C. Glasfurd (1862), Col. A. I. R.

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<sup>145</sup> W. V. Grigson, *The Maria Gonds* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936); Verrier Elwin, *The Muria and their Ghotul* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1947).

Glasfurd (1868), Col. Ward (1883), McGeorge (1876), Col. Fagan (1896), R. A. B. Chapman (1898), G. W. Geyer (1899-1903) and D. Brett (1910).<sup>146</sup>

Writing about the colonial myth of human sacrifice among the Gonds, Crispin Bates has argued that in the writings of these colonial officials there is no consistent ascription of primitiveness to the Gonds, nor a clear differentiation of the Gonds from the Hindu populations.<sup>147</sup> We have seen in the last chapter how colonial enumeration and classificatory practices struggled with a diversity of popular experiences to eventually reduce them to fixed and reductive identity markers. The allegation that the Gonds indulged in human sacrifice and cannibalism, in some ways the most damning marker of the “primitive” for these officials, Bates demonstrates, had little basis in “evidence” on which ironically these officials emphasized. It was instead the result of a complex combination of various colonial and princely motives including political expediency, the idea of the civilizing mission, Christian prejudices and rumor.<sup>148</sup> Bates also argues that there was a critical connection between these allegations and Gond rebellions so that the noble motive of eradicating a barbaric practice became the most important justification for the suppression of Gond resistance to colonial expansion.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 224-232. The most substantial of these writings are J. T. Blunt, “Narrative of a route from Chinargur to Yentrageodum...1795,” in *Early European Travellers in Nagpur Territory* (Nagpur: Govt. Press, 1930); P. Vans Agnew, *Report on the Subah or Province of Chhattisgarh, 1820* (Nagpur: Govt. Press, 1922); Richard Jenkins, *Report on the Territories of the Rajah of Nagpore* (Calcutta, 1927); C. L. R. Glasfurd, *Report on the Dependency of Bastar*, 1962 (Nagpur: Govt. Press, 1879)

<sup>147</sup> Crispin Bates, “Human Sacrifice in Colonial Central India: Myth, Agency and Representation,” in *Beyond Representation: colonial and postcolonial constructions of Indian Identity*, ed. Crispin Bates (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13-42.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Though the charges of human sacrifice declined by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when colonial control over southern Chhattisgarh became secure, the larger characterization of the Gonds as “primitive” had crystallized and become commonsense by the time Grigson and Elwin were writing. Their writings, and R. V. Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal’s *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916),<sup>150</sup> a slightly earlier ethnological survey of tribes in central India from which Grigson and Elwin borrowed extensively, worked from the certainty of the Gonds’ “primitiveness” and their separation from “Hindus” as “tribes.” Grigson and Elwin’s approach however was not condemnatory like that of the earlier officials but largely sympathetic, and in the case of Elwin, even romantic. Both Elwin and Grigson developed strong relationships with the people they wrote about and came to be engaged with questions about their future. Needless to say, they spent many precious years in this region and carried out painstaking research among the tribal peoples they wrote about.

Wilfrid V. Grigson was the administrator of the Bastar state from 1927 to 1931,<sup>151</sup> an “anthropologically-minded administrator.”<sup>152</sup> While in Bastar, he undertook ethnographic studies of the Gond peoples because he felt that unless the administrator understood the life and culture of the “primitive” people, there could be no redress to their problems. The primary purpose of his enquiries, he wrote, “was to ascertain grievances, especially those caused by the adoption in a “primitive state”<sup>153</sup> of criminal,

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<sup>150</sup> R. V. Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces of India, Vol. I-IV* (London: Macmillan, 1916).

<sup>151</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, xx.

<sup>152</sup> J. H. Hutton, “Introduction,” in Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, xv.

<sup>153</sup> Documents refer to “State,” “Bastar State” and “Kanker State.”

civil and revenue laws framed for British Indian districts some centuries more “advanced.”<sup>154</sup> Eventually, through his studies, he hoped to bring (and was later acknowledged as having brought) “practical benefits to the subjects of his studies.”<sup>155</sup> Most ironically, because I will argue that Grigson separated the Gonds from what he saw as the “political,” he believed that the colonial government needed to attend to the “economic” and “political” aspects of the tribal problem rather than the “cultural,” and championed the cause of tribal *panchayats*, which he revived in Bastar.<sup>156</sup> I will discuss Grigson’s dichotomous approach a little more later in this section. Elwin acknowledged that it was Grigson who had first “directed (his) attention to the ghotul” of Bastar,<sup>157</sup> inspired his work and had “unparalleled affection for Bastar and its peoples.”<sup>158</sup> Grigson left Bastar abruptly after the untimely death of his local companion Chetan Singh, a hunter with whom he had killed several man-eating tigers and developed a strong attachment.<sup>159</sup>

Elwin’s (1902-64) engagement with the tribal question was life-long. And among the many hats he wore, including that of administrator and policy-maker both in colonial and post-colonial regimes, the most distinguished was that of an anthropologist-activist who eventually became, arguably, an “insider.”<sup>160</sup> He first visited Bastar in 1935 and

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<sup>154</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, xix.

<sup>155</sup> Hutton, “Introduction,” xv.

<sup>156</sup> W. V. Grigson, “The Aboriginal in the Future India,” *Man in India*, XXVI, No. 2 (1946): 81.

<sup>157</sup> An important Muria institution.

<sup>158</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, xiii.

<sup>159</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 232.

<sup>160</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals and India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

continued his visits till 1942.<sup>161</sup> In 1940, he was appointed Census Officer and Honorary Ethnographer of the Bastar state.<sup>162</sup> Around this time he also married a Gond woman in another part of central India.<sup>163</sup> Though he studies many tribes, the Gonds were one of his major foci. Along with his seminal work on the Muria *ghotul* which I will discuss here, he wrote many articles and monographs on the Gonds on themes ranging from village life to songs and poetry, from suicide and funerary custom to cross-dressing.<sup>164</sup>

Both Grigson and Elwin shared the burden of writing about the life of the “primitive” subject populations of Bastar and Kanker who they saw as beleaguered and in need of state protection. A singular aspect of this condition of the tribal peoples, as described by these studies, was their powerlessness. The tribal peoples were located within the realm of “culture,” a set of beliefs, values, symbols and rituals that was discrete, inward-looking, bounded and turning on themselves.<sup>165</sup> This location was hived off from operations of the polity, restrictively defined as the “state.”<sup>166</sup>

This separation was achieved through a particular organization of chapters. These studies are typically prefaced by a short section on “history” that usually deals with state

<sup>161</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, xi.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Guha, *Savaging the Civilized*.

<sup>164</sup> Among his large corpus of work on the Gonds see with Shamrao Hivale, *Songs of the Forest: The Folk Poetry of the Gonds* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935); “Ceremonial Cross-Dressing among the Murias of Bastar State,” *Man in India* XXII, No. 2 (1942): 162; *Maria Suicide and Murder* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1943); “Funerary Customs in the Bastar State,” *Man in India* XXV, No. 2 (1945): 87; *Leaves from the Jungle: Life in a Gond Village* (Delhi: Vanya Prakashan, 1958).

<sup>165</sup> Saurabh Dube, *Historical Anthropology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>166</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*; Elwin, *The Muria*.

formations that are *external* to these societies and exercise uni-directional control *over* them. A short reference to the local *panchayat* in Grigson's chapter on "state" and "history" does not recognize the role that this body might have played in shaping the polity itself but mentions it as an aspect of the life of the Gonds whose continuance, though important, had little meaning for the life of the "state." This introductory chapter, which remains until the end a separate and disconnected section from the rest of the study, is followed by chapters/sections on "personal appearances and characteristics," "social organization and customs," "religion and magic" and "domestic life and economy/livelihood," which form the main body of the study.<sup>167</sup> This framing and structure was typical of normative anthropological writings of this time.

In separating the Gonds from polity, Grigson and Elwin followed Russell and Hira Lal's story about the political decline of the Gonds in the late medieval period. Russell and Hira Lal had argued that the Gonds had formed their own fairly advanced kingdoms in central India by the fourteenth century, with their capitals at Kherla, Deogarh, Garh-Mandla and Chanda.<sup>168</sup> According to them, the Maratha invasions in the eighteenth century destroyed these kingdoms after which the Gonds "soon lost every vestige of civilization, and became the cruel, treacherous savages depicted by travellers of this period."<sup>169</sup> The authors did not discuss the role of the Gonds in the feudatory kingdoms of Chhattisgarh and Orissa that survived until 1947, some of which, like Sakti,

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<sup>167</sup> Russell and Hira Lal, *Castes and Tribes*; Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*; Elwin, *The Muria*.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 47



Khairagarh, Kawardha and Raigarh, were ruled by dynasties of Gonds.<sup>170</sup> The Gond societies discussed by them appear as politically emasculated entities that had lost their ability for political thought and activity beyond the local, “social” level of village communities.

In Grigson, the political force and reach of the local communities is not entirely missing: he recognizes that the Maria Gonds of Bastar had still retained some sense of their past local political organization (*panchayat*), although he eventually marks this organization as “social” and “religious,” and as one of importance only for administrative convenience rather than politics. Grigson wrote:

One of the most remarkable features of Bastar of 1927 was the extent to which tribal, village and caste *panchayats* still regulated the religious and social life of the people, acted as intermediaries between them and the State and its zamindaris in meeting state demands for taxes, labour and supplies and in protecting the ryots from undue exactions, and exercised *de facto* criminal and civil jurisdiction. Here ready at hand was the nucleus of an organization that, if properly handled, could in time save the state much money spent on law and justice, police and general administration.<sup>171</sup>

At another point, Grigson offers another, more tantalizing glimpse of the relationship between the Maria Gonds and the “Bastar State” in the context of his discussion of the impact of the latter’s modernizing administrative policies on the former:

It is not surprising that, as a result of these methods of dealing with the aboriginals, their *panchayat* tended to co-operate as little as possible with the State; their object became to conceal crime from the police and in general comply with State requirements only so far as they were necessary to avoid trouble, and, above all, visits of subordinate State officials to the village.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> C. U. Wills, “The Territorial System of the Rajput Kingdom in Medieval Chhattisgarh,” *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* XV (1919): 205.

<sup>171</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 284.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

Grigson felt that it was by reviving the *panchayats* that the Gonds could be saved from the ills of modernization and devoted much of his time as an administrator doing so. But even in these stray moments where he admits some political significance in the *panchayat*, Grigson does not entertain the possibility of the Gonds as constitutive of the polity itself which remains a matter of a different level, untouched by “primitive” practices, political or otherwise.

The ancestral or clan gods of the Gonds in Bastar and Kanker were discussed under the section on religion. Earlier, Russell and Hira Lal had recognized that the ancestral gods were “integral” to the religion of the Gonds but did not give them any special place in Gond life except in funerary matters, and considered them as one among many kinds of gods.<sup>173</sup> Grigson identified the clan or ancestral gods of the Muria people as “Anga Deo” or “Pat Deo,” or what he calls “Log-gods,” a phenomenon common to the Halbas, Telangas and Marias as well.<sup>174</sup> These were other Gond tribes living proximately to the Marias.<sup>175</sup> According to Grigson, the Anga Deo embodied ancestral spirits and functioned through divination practices in forming and keeping clan and phratry organization and solidarity.<sup>176</sup> Grigson also suggested that along with Bhum (Earth) and the Village Mother, the Anga Deo formed a triad of deities who could stand in for each other and were probably worshipped more often than other gods.

Though Grigson does not clearly speak about any primacy that the Anga Deo might have had over other gods, he does mark certain extraordinary, or kingly, traits of

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<sup>173</sup> Russell and Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes, Vol. III*, 89-103.

<sup>174</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 198.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-207.

the Anga Deo. He mentions that one clan god, the Jhoria log-god of Narainpur, “had a special nose for witches,” so that the raja of Bastar had kept a replica of that god in his palace for witch-hunting, taking a fee of Rs. 5/- whenever the surrounding Muria Gonds “requisitioned its services.”<sup>177</sup> Further, the Pat-Raja, the “great log-god” of the Jate clan of Mohnar, and Use Modia, the log-god of the Lekhami clan of Ghotpal, according to Grigson, were known among the people as having originally divided up the two branches of the Marias, the Hill Marias and the Bison-Horn Marias, into clans.<sup>178</sup> These two instances are the only ones in which Grigson connected the Maria Anga Deo to any figure of the raja, the first directly to the raja of Bastar, and the second indirectly, in the presence of the term “raja” in the name of an Anga Deo.

Grigson might not have been able to collect more and precise information about the clan-gods among the Maria people because, as he wrote, this practice had become weak among the Bison-Horn Marias, the more numerous of the Maria peoples of Bastar, because of their dispersal away from their original clan centers.<sup>179</sup> The Bison-Horn Marias had over time moved down south towards Jagdalpur from the Hills of Abujhmar where the other important Maria group – the Hill Marias – still lived. The practice of the clan-god was more marked among the Hill Marias, the smaller group of Marias, than among the Bison-Horn Maria, the majority of the Marias. Among the Bison-Horn Marias, Grigson observed, due to the weakening of the cult of the clan log-god, “he is neglected almost entirely in the annual feast, or vaguely associated with the Departed...and tends to

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 197-205.

be regarded merely as one of the local godlings that are becoming as numerous among the Bison-Horn Marias as among the Gonds of the Central Provinces.”<sup>180</sup>

Elwin’s study is the most immediately relevant for Kanker because his objects of enquiry were the Muria Gonds who inhabited the region between the Marias of Bastar studied by Grigson and the Kanker Gonds. In the 1931 Census, while the Bastar Gonds were divided into various groups like the Muria, Maria, Halba, Dhuruwa and Bhattara, the Kanker Gonds continued to be described as just “Gonds.”<sup>181</sup> However, Grigson observed that “the Koitor (the name by which the Gonds call themselves) inhabitants of the Kanker State...are exactly of the same kind (Muria), intermarrying still with their Bastar Muria neighbours, and often called Muria by the Hindu residents of Kanker.”<sup>182</sup> In fact he goes on to say that though confusion can sometimes arise when separating the Marias and the Murias, it is clear that the latter share closer affinities with the Kanker Gonds.<sup>183</sup> Though in the present day the Kanker Gonds hardly use the term “Muria” for themselves, choosing to use sept or clan names one of which is “Muria,” Elwin also believed that the Bastar Murias had “many links with their fellows in Kanker State.”<sup>184</sup> Both Grigson and Elwin have explained this similarity by arguing that the Murias came into Bastar from central India and the Chhattisgarh plains via Kanker, and therefore resemble the central Indian Gond more than any other tribe in Bastar.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. 35-49.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 15.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 17.

Among the characteristics that the Murias and the Kanker Gonds shared, according to Elwin, was the strong cult of the clan-gods or the *anga dev*. Elwin observed that though the clans had scattered and divided, there was still “a deep attachment to the idea of the clan territory and clan god.”<sup>186</sup> Calling the *anga dev* “in form and character unique among the aboriginal gods of India,” Elwin wrote from his study of the Murias that:

Among the Bastar gods, these Anga are most widely regarded by the aboriginal populations. They are homely and familiar, and closely related to the life of every day. They constantly intervene in human affairs. They are keenly sensitive to the presence of evil. Their position as gods of the clans gives them great influence, for it means that they have to do with marriage and death, and all offences against clan custom and morality. The cult of the Anga is still thus very much alive and since it has been assimilated to the Hinduism of the Ruling Chief it is likely to endure.<sup>187</sup>

Elwin went on to write about the *anga dev* of Bare Dongar, the brothers Narsingnath Deo and Pat Deo, who were both being requisitioned on the payment of a fee by the people to resolve various problems faced by them. While Narsingnath resided in Bare Dongar, either a copy of the Pat Deo or the Pat Deo himself was taken to the palace in Jagdalpur by raja Bhairam Deo. Pat Deo was known for his skills in finding the practitioners of black magic.<sup>188</sup> Grigson, in his introduction to Elwin’s *Maria Murder and Suicide* (1943), tells us that Pat Deo was given a pride of place in the raja of Bastar’s Dasehra celebrations.<sup>189</sup>

However it appears that the *anga dev* of the Bastar did not acquire the kind of centrality in Bastar’s polity as their counterpart did in Kanker. While Chhote and Bade

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>189</sup> Elwin, *Maria Suicide*, x-xi.

Pat are primary in the royal ceremonies of *madai* and Dasehra, and in the royal connections with the villages in Kanker, the goddess Danteshwari occupies a similar position in Bastar.<sup>190</sup> While the diversity of ethnic groups and their cultural practices (including that of the *anga dev* which was prominent only among the Murias and the Hill Marias) in Bastar necessitated an integrative focus on a royal deity which no one group could claim as its own,<sup>191</sup> in Kanker the wide provenance of the *anga dev* practices among the Kanker Gonds despite a fair heterogeneity of groups among them made the *anga dev* the critical factor in royal strategies of power. In Bastar, it is only in the north, among the Murias living along the border with Kanker, where *anga dev* practices, as described by Elwin, were fundamental to tribal life, that Kunwar Pat *anga dev* at the shrine of the deity Bhangaram in Keshkal attracted the attention of the Bastar regime as a central godhead. The two *anga dev* mentioned by Elwin in connection with the raja of Bastar were part of the Bhangaram complex of deities. Most probably, as we have seen, the original *anga dev* remained in the Bare Dongar-Narainpur area in the north. I will discuss the Bhangaram complex in detail in the context of the *anga dev* accounts in a later chapter.

Though Elwin observed the significance of the *anga dev* to the Murias and to the raja of Bastar, he found little that was political in this phenomenon. This was in keeping with the thrust of his study where barring a brief introductory mention of the revival of tribal *panchayats*, there was little that was judged to be of political consequence in Muria

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<sup>190</sup> D. N. Majumdar, "Tribal Cultures and Acculturation," *Man in India* XIX, No. 1 (1939): 99; Sundar, *Sovereigns and Subalterns*, 61-76.

<sup>191</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereign*, 61-76.

life.<sup>192</sup> In fact what was “political,” the raja, was made “religious” in a short description of him as a “deity” in a list of Muria gods. Elwin wrote of the raja as deity as follows:

The Maharaja is regarded as divine by all the Muria and Maria of the Jagdalpur tehsil and by some of the northern Muria. Each ruler appends the word Deo to the end of his name...The ruler has special powers of intercession...His sacrifices, fasts and oblations during Dassera...benefit the people of the State. All the important deities of the State are brought to Jagdalpur during Dassera and worshipped on behalf of the ruler...This worship keeps away diseases from people and cattle and results in good crops and universal happiness...So strongly do the aboriginals believe in this that they greatly resent the Maharaja leaving the state even for a short time. His absence means a withdrawal of divine protection from cattle, crop and people.<sup>193</sup>

There is no discussion of what the *anga dev* could mean to the raja and his polity, even if the *anga dev* were not central to the polity in Bastar. The possibilities of a political reading of the raja-*anga dev* phenomenon, redolent in the afore-quoted paragraph, remain un-used in the particular culturalist framing employed by Elwin in discussing the Murias.

One can see this pattern in two other cases as well. One of these is another story about Bhairam Deo and Pat Deo. Elwin writes:

There was a great epidemic and none of the gods were able to help, so the Raja ordered them all to be thrown in the Indrawati River. But only Anga and his brother Pat Deo floated on the surface and drifted to the shore. This made them very famous, but the raja felt that it was wrong to keep two such gods in Jagdalpur and sent the Anga Narsingnath to Bara Dongar, where he has since resided.<sup>194</sup>

The second case is that of Elwin’s discussion of Lingo Pen, who almost all ethnographers writing about the Gonds describe as the most important “cult-hero” of the Gonds.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 10

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 225.

Interestingly, Elwin does not discuss the creation legend of the Gonds in which Lingo Pen is the protagonist in the section on Muria religion, though in the Gondi language *pen* means ancestral god. Elwin observed that at one time Lingo was honored in all Gond country but that now his cult was confined mostly to north Bastar (and Kanker by extension).<sup>196</sup> Elwin described Lingo as “lord of all the aboriginal gods of Bastar” and noted that when the festival of Lingo is held every three years at his residence in Semurgaon, “from all over the Jhorian, Amabera and Antagarh pargana (in north Bastar) and from Kanker State come the pilgrims bringing their gods with them, for Lingo is Raja and Bastar is his kingdom.”<sup>197</sup> In the following chapters I will discuss Lingo in the context of the *anga dev* practices in Kanker in detail. Suffice it to say here that Elwin’s register of religion remains a very constraining one when reading practices connecting the raja and the ancestral deities among the Gonds.

A somewhat different and rare view of the political significance of ancestral deities was provided by C. von Furer-Haimendorf, in the context of his study of clan gods among the Raj-Gonds, a sub-group of the Gonds, in Hyderabad in 1945. Furer-Haimendorf used his conclusions to critique the limited understanding of the clan god phenomenon in central India, which would include present day Chhattisgarh, among anthropologists like Grigson and Elwin.<sup>198</sup> He argued that the anthropologists had erred in not recognizing that “the cult of clan gods forms the very core of Gond religion.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> C. von Furer-Haimendorf, “The Cult of Clan Gods among the Raj-Gonds of Hyderabad,” *Man in India* XXV, No. 2 (1945): 149.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 149.



The clan gods represented the memory of the origin of the clan and the first settlement, and of the life of subsequent generations, and therefore were the keepers of the relationship between the Gond people and their world. Their propitiation, through ritual, was “enormously important for the relations between ancestors and the living.”<sup>200</sup> The upkeep of these clan gods was necessary for “unity and well-being,” which “attained their highest realization in the sacramental rites performed for them.”<sup>201</sup>

Then Furer-Haimendorf made another and for my purposes a more significant departure. He linked these clan gods to the “secular power of rulers.”<sup>202</sup> He wrote:

Some clan deities stand under the special protection of a family of Rajas...Sawera Pen (one kind of clan god) are found in the possession of the Raja's family...Associated with the Pen (clan god) of the Raja are deities that symbolize the secular power of rulers....<sup>203</sup>

Further, Furer-Haimendorf wrote about how these gods were considered like rajas (not unlike Elwin's example of raja being considered as god).<sup>204</sup> The *katora* (priest) of the Persa Pen (originary Raj-Gond clan god), addresses the Persa Pen in key rituals as follows:

Great King, give me food  
May good fortune be mine  
May my grain be plentiful  
May my house be prosperous  
Give me good fortune<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 154-55.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 157, 186.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 149-186.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 171.

Furer-Haimendorf's characterization of ancestral deity practices with its awkward play of "religious" and "secular" is not difficult to understand given that it tries to maintain a distinction between these two terms in describing a phenomenon that calls for an abandoning of this distinction.

The writings of colonial administrator-anthropologists were complicit in the construction of the Gond peoples as "primitive," and in their separation from the sphere of the "political" which was given over to the "state." Yet even in their definition of the life of the Gonds as narrowly a sphere of apolitical "culture," these writings betray traces of a much wider realm of the political. We are provided glimpses of other regimes of power, of the *panchayats* and the clan gods, that were clearly more important to the polity than the writers admit, and might not be hived off as "culture." In the following section I turn to the administrative archive of the "princely state" of Kanker where these very administrator-anthropologists and their colleagues were engaged in producing and marking off the political as "state."

### **Administrative Records: Archiving the "State," Un-archiving the "People"**

In the years leading to the merger of the "princely state" of Kanker with the Union of India in 1947, from 1941 to 1946, the Kanker administration produced, in the form of its Annual Administrative Reports,<sup>206</sup> a most comprehensive and systematic representation of the "Kanker State," the term by which the colonial-princely regime called itself. These reports were prepared by the office of the Superintendent (1941-43) and the Diwan (Chief Minister) (1944-46) of the Kanker State from inputs from the various administrative departments of the government. They were meant to be submitted

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<sup>206</sup> *AAR, 1941-46*, IOR, V/10/1368-72, London: British Library.

for the scrutiny of the Political Agent, the Resident of the Chhattisgarh States and the Crown Representative in that order, being forwarded to the superior office at each level for comments and filing. Though there is some difference in the organization of the report, they followed the same broad scheme of chapterization. The chapters of the reports were titled “General and Political,” “Administrative and Constitutional Reforms,” “Administration of the Land,” “Protection,” “Production and Distribution,” “Revenue and Finance,” “Education,” “Medical and Public Health” and “Vital Statistics/Statistical Returns.”<sup>207</sup>

In “General and Political” the sub-headings were “Situation,” “Area and Population,” “Capital,” “Archaeological Monuments,” “Climate,” “System of Administration,” “Rulers and History,” “War Efforts,” “Visitors,” “Important Events,” “Change in Personnel,” “Tours of the Ruler and Diwan” (from 1944) and “Natural and Mineral Resources.”<sup>208</sup> The most important section was “Rulers and History,” an account of the British acquisition of Kanker, a list of rajas of the ruling dynasty and the present ruler’s education and accomplishments.

The remaining chapters, which were all longer than the first and formed the greater part of the report, were devoted to an account of the growth and changes in administration in different spheres of the “state’s” competence as indicated by the titles of each chapter. In the report for 1943-44, the chapter “Production and Distribution” had a small last section called “General Condition of the State and People” which was short

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

and made some comments on the state of rainfall, condition of agrarian production, the trend (increase/decrease) in criminal offences and “general well-being.”<sup>209</sup>

In the main, the larger administrative sections contained matter-of-fact data, often statistically organized, about their various topics, so that the general sense one gets is of a territorially fixed, modern, rational, legal “state” of the Weberian type, claiming all-encompassing reach.<sup>210</sup> The ubiquitousness and comprehensiveness of law and administration deriving from this governance seemed to spread over and contain everything concerned with the life of the people. The “state” appeared benign, neutral, guardian-like and welfarist, keen on the “improvement” and “development” of the people, terms that appear often in the reports. It claimed to rule through law and order and good management.

Most importantly, the “state” was sovereign, all powerful, sanctified by history and justified by its ability to be state-like, just like its central figure and symbolic head, the raja, represented it in the afore-quoted statement as its sovereign. People and their lives were reduced to the empty register of numbers, quantified and managed within the objective logic of the report. Not surprisingly, the last ruler of Kanker wrote as follows while merging his “state” into the Union of India in 1947 through an “Instrument of Accession”:

Nothing in this Instrument affects the continuance of my sovereignty in and over this state, or, save as provided by or under this Instrument, the exercise of any powers, authority and rights now enjoyed by me as Ruler of this State...<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> *AAR, 1943-44.*

<sup>210</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 156.

<sup>211</sup> *Accession of Kanker State to the Dominion of India*, File No. 8 (75), PR/1947, Ministry of States, Political Branch, New Delhi: National Archives of India (henceforth NAI).

Behind this posturing was the imprint of the colonial regime. Though lack of financial resources and manpower, and the resistance of local socio-political formation, meant that the British had to accede to the concept of “indirect rule” in the case of princely regimes, and had to allow them to carry on with or organize their own *bandobast* (administrative arrangements), colonial intervention in the affairs of the princely regimes was never absent.<sup>212</sup> Since Kanker was neither economically nor politically strategic, and was also remote, colonial officials turned their attention on Kanker relatively late. Yet ironically, the consequent inability and slowness of the raja’s regime in Kanker in establishing the structures and processes of a “modern state,” which became incumbent on most princely regimes at some point or another, might eventually have forced the colonial officials to take a closer look at Kanker. Weak or incapable rulers and succession-related uncertainties had long been the opportunity for increase in colonial interference in the princely regimes. Beginning with 1892, Kanker too provided several such occasions for colonial intervention and control.

In 1892, Kanker’s ruler Narharideo was diagnosed with chronic dementia and removed from his duties for two years, returning only in 1894.<sup>213</sup> The colonial officials, in their discussions, were keen to take over management of the princely regime temporarily rather than leave it to the raja’s relatives, especially because Kanker seemed to be without proper governance.<sup>214</sup> Not surprisingly, the first revenue settlement of

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<sup>212</sup> Ramusack, *The Princes of India*, 9-13; Ernst and Pati, *India’s Princely States*, 1-15.

<sup>213</sup> *Feudatory State of Kanker taken under direct management owing to mental alienation of its Chief*, Proceedings, July 1892, File Nos. 89-94, Internal A, Foreign Department, Calcutta Records, New Delhi: NAI; *Administration of Kanker State restored to its Chief*, Proceedings, August 1894, File Nos. 139-142, Foreign Department, Shimla Records, New Delhi: NAI.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

Kanker of the modern, rational type was “started” in 1892.<sup>215</sup> Further, when the British restored Narharideo to the throne in 1894, they did this on the condition that the budget of the administration would henceforth be prepared in consultation with the Political Agent.<sup>216</sup> A second occasion for colonial intervention came soon after, at the time of the death of Narharideo in 1903, when his nephew and successor Komal Deo, 29 years of age, was found to be with “poor education” and “very little judicial and administrative experience,” and hence in need of guidance and supervision.<sup>217</sup> Colonial officials decided that he needed help in financial, judicial, revenue and administrative matters and proposed arrangements including themselves that would achieve this.<sup>218</sup>

Though in the eyes of colonial officials, Komal Deo eventually grew into an able ruler, and colonial interference receded in the later years of his rule, the imprint of the colonial regime continued to be present in the subsequent growth and expansion of a modern revenue system under Komal Deo, in part the result of the training that the ruler had received in administration from colonial officers in the early days of his rule.<sup>219</sup> The 1892-94 settlement had been meant for a period of seven years.<sup>220</sup> This had involved a “summary” settlement of 407 out of 500 villages in which lump sum payments from

<sup>215</sup> AAR, 1943-44, 6-7.

<sup>216</sup> *Administration of Kanker State restored to its Chief.*

<sup>217</sup> *Death of Maharaj Adhiraj Narhari Deo, Feudatory Chief Kanker State and succession of his nephew Lal Komal Deo. Registration of the State as liable to the operation of nazarana rules, and permanent exemption of the State from payment of tribute*, Proceedings, February 1904, File Nos. 80-84, Internal A, Government of India Foreign Department, Shimla Records, New Delhi: NAI.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 126-32.

<sup>220</sup> AAR, 1943-44, 6-7.

villages were ascertained and documented.<sup>221</sup> The rates were revised in a second seven-year settlement in 1901-2.<sup>222</sup>

The third settlement in 1909 under Komal Deo was for 12 years and went beyond the revision of rates to the promulgation of a detailed revenue code called *Kanoon Mal* (or the “Law of Agrarian Revenue”) which borrowed heavily from the revenue code in use in the Central Provinces, and can be said to have been a wholesale adaptation of the particular revenue terminology prevalent in Kanker to the prior code.<sup>223</sup> The *Kanoon Mal* listed 297 clauses including detailed regulations concerning the obligations of the cultivators, the *haqq* (right) of the *riyasat* (state) and *malguzar/gaontia*, rules for the use of forest and grazing commons, duties of the revenue-free grantee, etc.<sup>224</sup> Despite the fact that this code was very detailed, it was only in 1920-21, when a new settlement was made for 15 years, that 366 out of 565 revenue villages could be “surveyed,” that is, individual cultivators were approached and separately settled.<sup>225</sup> Komal Deo’s reign also saw the establishment of modern schools and hospitals for the first time in Kanker, and the beginnings of modern judiciary and policing.<sup>226</sup>

However, proper colonial-style governance became possible only after the death of Komal Deo in 1925. The controversy surrounding the succession of the minor ruler Bhanu Pratap Deo provided yet another and this time fairly extended opportunity for

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Durga Prasad Tiwari (Diwan Kanker Riyasat), *Kanoon Mal* (1909).

<sup>224</sup> Tiwari, *Kanoon Mal*.

<sup>225</sup> *AAR*, 1943-44, 6-7.

<sup>226</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 131-32.

direct colonial control.<sup>227</sup> Until 1944, when Bhanu Pratap was given full ruling powers, it was the colonial officials who administered Kanker through the Superintendent appointed by the Eastern States' Agency. Not surprisingly, the hitherto fitful and piece-meal implementation of modern, rational administrative practices was speeded up and made comprehensive and regular in this period with special focus on agrarian and forest revenue, and judicial and police systems.

The present *patta* (revenue agreement between state and cultivator which states landholding and revenue obligation of the latter to the former) documents of Kanker date back to the only full survey-based revenue settlement of 1938-40, conceived of and executed under colonial officials.<sup>228</sup> This process of survey and settlement, meant to supersede summary settlement, was an attempt to gather information and enunciate rules for a revenue system that would control agrarian production, incomes and revenue to the greatest of detail from the top. It was an attempt to reduce and eventually end the uncertainties that came from dependence on local and traditional methods of agrarian production, income and revenue estimation and revenue collection. Proforma mapping of cultivable land and enumeration of measures provided the technology for achieving this control. The forms for *jamadami bandobast* (revenue administration) and within it for *khasra bandobast* (agricultural land administration) that came into full use in 1940 had up to 15 heads each.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 135-137.

<sup>228</sup> AAR, 1943-44, 6-7; *Land Records of Kanker*, Kanker: Kanker District Collectorate Record Room.

<sup>229</sup> *Forms for Jamadami Bandobast and Khasra Bandobast, Kanker State, 1940*, Kanker: Kanker District Collectorate Record Room.



The scientific management of forestry was begun in the 1930s with working plans and forest demarcation and policing; and forests soon became the highest revenue-earning sector of the economy.<sup>230</sup> As a report notes, “till 1930 no scientific management of forest was attempted...the forests remained practically unexplored till then.”<sup>231</sup> The appointment of a Forest Advisor for the Eastern States Agency in 1930 started off the process of setting up the forest department<sup>232</sup> and in 1939 and early 1940s, the demand for war timber hastened the process of extending and regularizing the administration of the forests.<sup>233</sup>

In the 1940s, a joint administration of justice was started with Bastar to rationalize the judicial system in Kanker in tune with the more closely controlled and larger state of Bastar. This was in recognition of the fact that past attempts at setting up the modern judicial system had not been very successful.<sup>234</sup> The same was the case with police administration.<sup>235</sup> 4 police stations were set up in different parts of Kanker in 1945 in addition to the main station in the town of Kanker.<sup>236</sup> By 1943-44, 65 Acts of Law were in operation in the princely state, many of them applied quite late in comparison to British India and other princely states.<sup>237</sup> Only 6 of these had been locally compiled, the

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<sup>230</sup> *AAR, 1944-45*, IOR, V/10/1371, 34-35.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, *AAR, 1945-46*, 32.

<sup>232</sup> Sur, *Working Plan*, iv.

<sup>233</sup> *AAR, 1944-45*, 34-35; *AAR, 1945-46*, 32.

<sup>234</sup> *AAR, 1943-44*, 8-9.

<sup>235</sup> *AAR, 1944-45*, 14.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *AAR, 1943-44*, 32-34.

rest being extended from British India.<sup>238</sup> Claims of a modern “state” were clearly taking shape.

When Bhanu Pratap Deo came of age in 1943, and ruling powers were gradually returned to him, he had been admirably well educated and trained by the colonial state to become the ruler of a modern state, qualities that his predecessor had, according to colonial opinion, woefully lacked. Bhanu Deo was educated at Rajkumar College in Raipur and Mayo College in Ajmer, both institutions that had been set up to prepare rulers for the princely states by providing them education modeled on the English public school system.<sup>239</sup> Just before he took charge as a ruler in 1943-44, Bhanu Deo was sent to the Indian Civil Services Camp in Mussoorie in December 1943 for training in modern administrative practices.<sup>240</sup>

For the short period that he ruled, he out-matched the modernization drive of all the colonial and Kanker state officials before him as is evident from the annual reports of the years of his rule.<sup>241</sup> He began new initiatives like “agricultural and rural development,” “Grow More Food Campaign,” “Grain Bank,” “Agricultural and Industrial Exhibitions” “Cattle Show” and propaganda tours by officials to promote these programs.<sup>242</sup> Bhanu Deo’s representation in these records exemplified the “state” and sovereignty that the administrative reports were seeking to construct. In their claims, the

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Waltraud and Pati, *Peoples, Princes and Colonialism*, 4; George Devereux Oswell, *A Sketch of Rajkumar College Raipur, Central Provinces* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1902).

<sup>240</sup> *AAR*, 1943-44, 2.

<sup>241</sup> *AAR*, 1944-45; *AAR*, 1945-46.

<sup>242</sup> *AAR*, 1944-45, 29-35.

ruler and princely regime of Kanker had come a long way from 1809 when colonial officials had called the raja of Kanker a “zemindar.”<sup>243</sup> The last raja of Kanker was very comfortable claiming sovereign status in the Instrument of Accession in 1947.

The administrative records clearly show the hand of the colonial officials in the discourse and process of “state.” Colonial attention to the proper functioning of the princely administration became sharp in the period 1941-44 when the transfer of power to the ruler became imminent. Reports were now required to be printed and circulated in large numbers to the various levels of the administrative chain of command.<sup>244</sup> A memorandum of comments of various colonial officials followed the submission of these reports.<sup>245</sup> Every detail of the report was scrutinized in the interest of rational administration and representation.<sup>246</sup> Satisfaction was expressed where “progress” and “improvement” had taken place and “primitive systems” were being replaced by modern ones; and complaints were aired when the state was seen as being “inefficient” and “slow.”<sup>247</sup>

While princely and colonial powers cannot always be collapsed into one regime given the often conflictual relationship that existed between them, they appear in these administrative records as jointly bringing into existence the “state,” a domain of sovereign power and authority in which they colluded more than they conflicted.

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<sup>243</sup> *Death of Maharaj Adhiraj Narharideo.*

<sup>244</sup> *Eastern States Agency, Memorandum of Comments on the Administrative Report for Kanker State for 1941-44* (henceforth *ESA, MC*), File No. R-9-39/43-6431, D/3182, 1943-44, New Delhi: NAI.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

Especially from 1925 onward, it would not be wrong to speak of a “colonial-princely regime” for Kanker. The administrative records of this regime then comprise a language of stateness that enunciates, collects and concentrates this domain to the exclusion of the peoples who, measured and managed as mere numbers, fall passively under its sway. Developing Weber’s formulation of the modern state, Pierre Bourdieu speaks of “state capital,” a domain where through claims of sovereign control over violence (police and army), economy (taxation and codes), information (knowledge of population and territory) and symbols (juridical discourse, etc.), the “state” produces the “thought of the state,”<sup>248</sup> The administrative records of princely Kanker show precisely this process at work. Yet one may ask how far these records succeed in actualizing the claims of the “state.”

On closer study, the state documents appear less successful in producing their modern, rational regimes of administration than they pretended to. In fact, as the memoranda of comments on the reports demonstrate, the density of administrative information was probably more the result of anxiety caused by the lack of modernization and therefore control than the consequence of its success. It becomes clear that prior to 1941, the reports were handwritten and irregular, signs of the weakness of administration.<sup>249</sup> Further, these comments constitute almost an impatient tutorial to a novice on how to prepare the report, and more importantly, how to run the administration well, as though the officials charged with administration were failing in their effort.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the state: Genesis and Structure of the bureaucratic field,” in *State/Culture: State-formation after the cultural turn*, ed. G. Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 55; quoted in Blom Hansen and Stepputat, *States of Imagination*, 5-6.

<sup>249</sup> *ESA, MC*.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

One comment laments how 18 years of colonial supervision had not achieved much because the management of the “state” was of “limited efficiency” on account of the “small” resources.<sup>251</sup>

The larger point is that the reports represented a late quickening of modern administrative re-organization in Kanker as is evident from the fact that all the key measures which constituted the activities of the state as reported, most notably those concerned with agrarian and forest revenues, and judicial and police systems, took shape belatedly around and after 1940. Given that a proper revenue settlement could not be made until the 1940s, the regime of local power structures and processes must have comprised the critical link between the people and the colonial-princely regime. Even by the mid-1940s, only half of the total forest area was covered under the working plan; and there was virtually no infrastructure or personnel to implement the projects for scientific forestry.<sup>252</sup> What this meant is that the forests of Kanker continued to be accessed by the people with little restriction of the kind that “reservation” would later bring and according to local needs and customs.

There is also a distinct sense in the reports and the comments on them that the structures and processes of governance put out from the top were not connecting with the people and their lives, and that the people needed to be “induced” more intensively to accept these measures.<sup>253</sup> The report of 1941 mentioned, for example, that “with a view to bringing the people of the state in closer touch with administration,” to “consider all

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., Sub-File: Letter from Political Agent to Secretary of Resident of Eastern States, Comments on Report for 1943-44, 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1945, Item 28.

<sup>252</sup> *AAR*, 1945-46, 32.

<sup>253</sup> *AAR*, 1944-45, 33.

questions affecting the well-being of people” and to “bring the necessities and grievances of the people,” two “Local Boards” had been set up, one in each of the two *tehsils* (administrative division) of the state in 1940.<sup>254</sup> This was an arrangement outside of the regular structures of the “state,” and sought to borrow from the local form of the *panchayat*, otherwise not mentioned anywhere in the report, to achieve its objective of establishing closer contact with the people.<sup>255</sup>

Another example of how the colonial-princely regime of Kanker continued to depend on local practices that did not emerge from its dispensation and that it otherwise saw as “primitive” can be seen in the case of its administration of “criminal justice” and “police.” The reports suggest that a judicial system was securely in place with a High Court and Sessions Court; and judicial expertise was being shared with Bastar.<sup>256</sup> They also give details of criminal cases reported, investigated and disposed of.<sup>257</sup> The police force is said to have been “sufficient,” equipped with horses and cycles, briefed in law and legal procedure, and trained in police training centers outside Kanker.<sup>258</sup> Yet, it were the *kotwar*, described in the reports as “village police,”<sup>259</sup> local notables attached to village and Gond clan hierarchies who could hardly be called “police” in the sense in which the term was being used in the reports, who continued to be sought out by the state to fulfill the actual functions of policing in much of the territory of Kanker.

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<sup>254</sup> *AAR*, 1941-42, 2.

<sup>255</sup> *ESA*, MC, Sub-File: Letter from Political Agent to Secretary of Resident of Eastern, Comments on Report for 1943-44, 4<sup>th</sup> States, Item. 13.

<sup>256</sup> *AAR*, 1943-44, 8-9.

<sup>257</sup> *AAR*, 1941-42, 9; *AAR* 1942-43, 15; *AAR* 1943-44, 9-10; *AAR* 1944-45, 16; *AAR* 1945-46, 12.

<sup>258</sup> *AAR*, 1941-42, 7-8; *AAR* 1942-43, 9-10, *AAR* 1943-44, 11.

<sup>259</sup> *AAR*, 1941-42, 8.

In 1941-42, there were only 103 policemen in contrast to 352 *kotwar* for 564 villages.<sup>260</sup> While the policemen were paid by the administration, the *kotwar* were paid through traditional arrangements in the villages.<sup>261</sup> Whereas the policemen in 1942-43 had only eight horses and five cycles to go into the villages<sup>262</sup> that were mostly not connected with proper roads,<sup>263</sup> the *kotwar* belonged to and lived in the villages. Most of the criminal offences reported never came to trial and were handled by *kotwar* within the ambit of customary practices in the villages. Although this is not stated in the reports, it becomes clear from the fact that a substantial number of cases are mentioned as “dealt with under section 157 (b) of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC)” which states that “if it appears to the officer in charge of a police station that there is no sufficient ground for entering on an investigation, he shall not investigate the case.”<sup>264</sup> A complaint in the comments on the report argued that though the *kotwar* could be expected to bring to the administration’s notice major offences, since they were paid by the villagers, they were not likely to report or deal with many offences as expected in the CPC.<sup>265</sup>

The claims of the princely and colonial powers to statehood were thus a compound of their common and collaborative desire to appropriate the commanding heights; and appear as the sole points of initiative in the making of the polity. Despite

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> *AAR*, 1942-43, 9-10.

<sup>263</sup> *ESA*, MC, Sub-File: Letter from Resident to Secretary of Crown Representative, Comments on Report for 1942-43, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1944, 3.

<sup>264</sup> *AAR*, , 1941-42, 9; *AAR* 1942-43, 15; *AAR* 1943-44, 9-10; *AAR* 1944-45, 16; *AAR* 1945-46, 12.

<sup>265</sup> *ESA*, MC, Sub-File: Letter from Resident to Secretary of Crown Representative, Comments on Report for 1942-43, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1944, 2.

these claims, statist records, and thus the “state,” could speak only from a contested and negotiated space. The gaps and inconsistencies in statist records throw light on the frayed edges of “state” and sovereignty, and point to the possibility that, as Timothy Mitchell has argued in “The Limits of the State” (1991), the “state” was hardly a discrete structure or idea of legal rationality wholly achieved and fully present but one whose boundaries were uncertain, and which was penetrated from all sides by societal elements.<sup>266</sup> In the next section I turn to the *iqrarnama*, where precisely in a set of statist records, non-statist sovereignties are very clearly intimated if also sought to be rationalized and contained.

### ***Iqrarnama*: Intimations of “Un-state-like” Sovereignty**

In the first chapter, I have made references to the *iqrarnama*. The practice of taking Chhote Pat to the villages is a very old one: the villagers remember stories about this from the time of Narharideo (1853-1903). While one of Darro’s stories recounted earlier suggests that Chhote and Bade Pat came into the possession of the raja in the period of the Kandra dynasty (1344-97),<sup>267</sup> the other story suggests that it was Narharideo who lifted the *anga dev* brothers out of the river. In any case, this practice was well established in the colonial period. The question of how old the practice was of applying for permission to take Chhote Pat in a legal way, through a stamped *iqrarnama*, is however unclear. I have found *iqrarnama* at the palace and in the possession of the *pujari* of Chhote Pat dating back to 1946, from the reign of Bhanu Pratap Deo (1943-47).

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<sup>266</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics,” *American Political Science Review* 85, No. 1 (1991): 77.

<sup>267</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 77-80.



References to similar practices in Bastar suggest that this practice is likely to have been older. Verrier Elwin writes that in 1940, Aitu, the Muria headman of Palki, wrote an application to the *tahsildar* (officer in charge of *tehsil*) on an eight *anna* (unit of currency) stamped paper and paid a fee of five rupees to have the officer issue a *parwana* (order) to have the Narsingnath *anga dev* of Bada Dongar taken to Palki.<sup>268</sup> Aitu had requested the *anga dev*'s visit in order to divine the cause of illness among humans and beasts, and the failure of crop, that had been afflicting Palki for a long time. Elwin adds that a copy of Narsingnath's brother, Pat *anga dev*, had been installed in the palace at Jagdalpur (the capital of Bastar) since the time of Raja Bhairam Deo (1853-1891)<sup>269</sup> who valued greatly the *anga dev*'s ability to hunt witches.<sup>270</sup> Grigson writes of another *anga dev*, the Jhoria log-god of Narainpur, whose copy had been kept by Bhairam Deo at the palace for the same reason; and which was being requisitioned by the Murias in 1927 for a fee of five rupees to the state treasury.<sup>271</sup>

It is certainly possible that in Kanker too the practice of *igrarnama* is older than the late 1940s and continues till today. The very poor condition of the 1940s *igrarnama*, and the fact that they had almost been thrown away suggests that the pre-1940s *igrarnama* may not have survived.<sup>272</sup> It is also possible to argue that the *igrarnama* in Kanker were the result of a fuller administrative practice that, as I have argued earlier,

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<sup>268</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 192.

<sup>269</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 101-109.

<sup>270</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 192.

<sup>271</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 198.

<sup>272</sup> The *igrarnama* of the pre-1948 period were, along with later ones till the 1980s, put away in trunks in the storerooms of the palace in Kanker.

became possible only in the early 1940s, and might have been learnt, as in other cases, from the better organized Bastar regime.

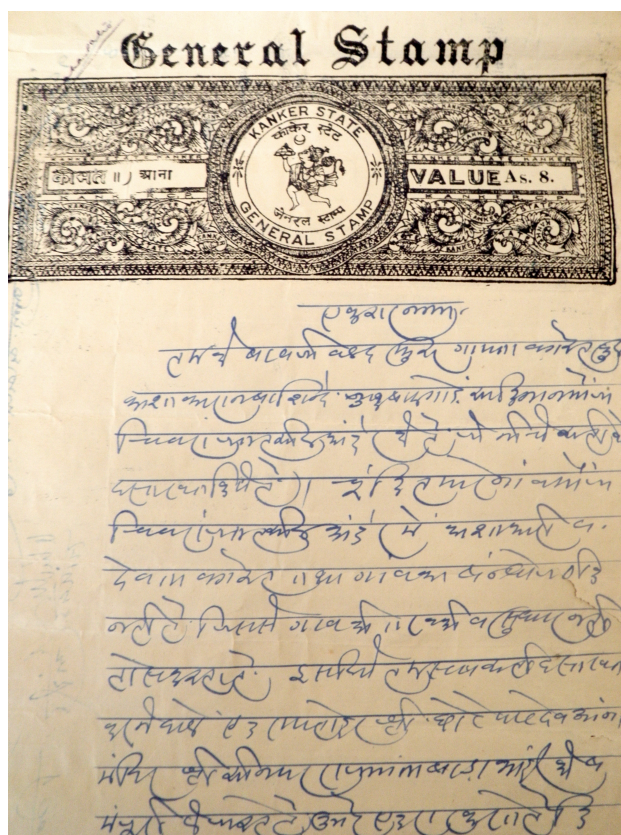


Photo 9. An *Igrarnama*, 1946.

Unlike in Kanker, the two *anga dev* known to have been at the palace in Bastar were copies of the originals in Bade Dongar and Narainpur. Bhangaram and Kunwar Pat became important to the regime in Bastar because of the need to tie the Muria people, living far away from Jagdalpur in the area bordering Kanker, to the center. The greater political significance of the *anga dev* in Kanker in contrast with Bastar will be discussed in detail in the later chapters. Here it should suffice to say that the centrality of Kunwar Pat *anga dev* in north Bastar has continued like in Kanker till the present, except that for

some time now it has had little connection with the Bastar royal family and the practice of *igrarnama* was discontinued about a decade back.<sup>273</sup>

There is however a critical difference between the *igrarnama* of Kanker before and after 1948.<sup>274</sup> The *igrarnama* (document of agreement, from the Urdu *igrar*, meaning affirmation) of the colonial-princely regime represents a formal application of subjects to the administration requisitioning the visit of Chhote Pat, an ancestral Gond deity in the possession of the raja. After 1948, they represent an agreement between two legally equal parties, the supplicants and the former royal family, overseen by a third entity, the post-colonial state. The reasons why the *igrarnama* remain in use even today are several.

To some extent this practice from colonial times was retained after 1948 out of form. The paper work also permitted a better management of Chhote Pat's visits by the royal family. Finally, in recent years, the *igrarnama* have served to legitimate a practice that is considered by normative discourses to be "superstition," especially since the practice encroaches on the "secular" sphere of justice that is claimed as the monopoly of the post-colonial state. The royal family, the supplicants as well as the police have found it prudent to have this practice "legalized." However, my brother Surya, who often speaks for the raja since he is more continuously present in Kanker, tells me that he has been encouraging the villagers not to seek Chhote Pat's intervention if the matter is one that concerns the police. He has often refused to allow Chhote Pat's visits in such cases.

How do we understand the *igrarnama* as a documentary practice of the colonial-princely regime? What do the *igrarnama* tell us about the princely regime, the people and

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<sup>273</sup> I was told this by the late Lambodar Balihar, head of the Bhangaram *jatra*, in a conversation in May 2012, only a few weeks before he died.

<sup>274</sup> The Kanker State's administration was in place till 1948.

their interaction through the practice of the visit of Chhote Pat to the villages? From a study of the *iqrarnama* of the pre-1949 period, most of them from 1946, it is clear that the *iqrarnama* were hand-written in a standard format on the stamped papers of the “Kanker State” by an official scribe (*arzinawis*) in formal Hindustani with Hindi-Chhattisgarhi terms.<sup>275</sup> These *iqrarnama* were not filed and maintained in the public records of the administration: I found them stashed away in trunks in the store room of the palace in Kanker. Even today, when a copy of the *iqrarnama* is submitted to the police, it is not filed and saved in their records but disposed of after a verbal acknowledgement by the *thana* officials receiving the documents. This archival “reluctance” of the *iqrarnama* or their supposed custodians is notable. The *anga dev* practices described in the *iqrarnama* appear to have been sufficiently important to warrant documentary activity by the regime but not important enough to require archival filing and safe-keeping. What might explain this ambiguity in the archival status of the *iqrarnama* and the archivability of the *anga dev* practices?

In the seven *iqrarnama* that I have studied carefully (the others are in a very poor condition and illegible), the supplicants described themselves as *gaon-wasi* (villagers) or *kashtkar* (tenants). They comprised groups as large as 15 people representing their village (*gaon*, *mauja*) to as small as a family of five and spoke of themselves, when “surnames” were mentioned,<sup>276</sup> as Gond, Thakur, Kalar, Gaita and Nai, community appellations we would identify as tribal or lower caste today.<sup>277</sup> The supplicants were from the villages of

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<sup>275</sup> *Anga Dev Iqrarnama* (henceforth *ADI*), Series 1.1-1.7, 1946-48, Kanker: Private Collection, Kanker Palace Library.

<sup>276</sup> Very few mention their surnames and identify themselves by the names of their fathers. Post-1948, surnames are clearly and almost always mentioned.

<sup>277</sup> *ADI*, Series 1.1-1.7.

Nadanmara (two groups), Makdi, Chivranj, Urkuda from Kanker *tehsil* and Pandarwahi and Bhondia from Bhanupratap-pur *tehsil*, and had put their thumb impressions on the paper. Let us take a closer look at these *iqrarnama*. Following are translations of the main contents of these *iqrarnama*, without the full list of the supplicants: the parentheses and italics are mine.

The *iqrarnama* submitted by Bhav Singh Kalar, Mehettar Gond Gaita and others of Nadanmara on behalf of their village on 01.28.1946, reads as follows:

This is to seek permission (*ijaazat*) from the Sub-Divisional Munsif Saheb of Kanker State to take Chhote Pat to Nadanmara, *tehsil* Kanker, for the purpose of the restoration of the proper arrangement of the village (*gaon sudhaarana*). You are respectfully informed that because the configuration (*bandhej*) of gods (*devi-devta*) is not proper/good (*theek nahin hai*) in our village, the village is being disturbed/unmade/corrupted (*bigad raha hai*) day by day through crisis (*sankat*) and illness (*beemari*). We the villagers therefore want to take Chhote Pat Deo of the Kanker Rajbada (palace) for restoring the proper arrangement of the village and the gods. After offering what is customary (*rasum*), we will return Chhote Pat with care. We will not allow any disorder/violence and rioting (*danga-fasad*) during this time. We submit the following for your kind permission.<sup>278</sup>

In another *iqrarnama* from Nadanmara submitted on 08.18.1946, Bhav Singh Kalar, Shobha Ram Nai, Sonar Ram Gond and others, representing their village, petitioned as follows:

We, the villagers of Nadanmara affirm that we want to take Chhote Pat Deo of the Kanker Rajbada to our village Nadanmara in the Kanker *tehsil* for restoring the proper arrangement of our village and for the upkeep (*dekh-rekh*) of our village. We commit that we will offer worship (*puja*) as is customary and that the entire village will be responsible (*zimmedar*) for this. Whatever arises out of this will be settled as per the decision (*faisala*) of the local notables (*panch*)<sup>279</sup>, and the entire village will be responsible if there is any trouble (*gadbadi*) or disorder. We will

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<sup>278</sup> ADI, I.I.

<sup>279</sup> I will discuss the meaning of *panch* in the chapter five.

return Chhote Pat to his temple in the palace when our work with the gods is done.<sup>280</sup>

In an *iqrarnama* dated 10.17.1946 from Makdi, Rahipal Thakur, son of Gaudo Gond wrote thus for his family and clan:

We of one clan (*gotra*) in Makdi feel that sorrow is raining (*dukh baras raha hai*) on our family because its arrangement (*intezam*) has gone wrong. We therefore ask to take Chhote Pat of the temple in the palace to our village because the Kanker State has given him for the people (*janata*). We want him to see our homes, and to restore their proper arrangement. If any action is taken, we will be responsible for it; and will see to it that there is no disorder on this count. We will organize (*prabandh*) the customary worship and return Chhote Pat to the temple.<sup>281</sup>

In another *iqrarnama*, Rai Singh Parmanand Gada and other villagers from Bondia village applied on behalf of their village on 05.03. 1947 as follows:

We are residents of Bhondia village of the Kanker State. The people of our village are falling ill daily. We don't know what is afflicting them. The arrangement of our village and its gods is being disturbed/undone/corrupted. We want to take Chhote Pat who resides in the court of Rajmata in Kanker so that he can make a proper arrangement of gods in our village (*devi-devta banana*), remove any god who has come into someone's house and to catch any wizard or witch (*tonha-tonhi*). If anyone is found guilty (*kasurwan*), we undertake to offer whatever worship is required together.<sup>282</sup>

From Pandarwahi village in the *tehsil* of Bhanuparap-pur there was an application made through an *iqrarnama* on 05.26.1947 which reads:

The cattle in our village are sick and the village is also disturbed. We therefore want to take Chhote Pat, who resides in the palace of the Rajmata to our village. Chhote Pat can be taken around the village for the making of a proper arrangement for the village (*gaon banana*). Whoever wants to take him to his house to catch any wizard or witch will be responsible for doing so. We will keep Chhote Pat with the other gods of the village and propitiate him (*seva*) as is

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<sup>280</sup> *ADI, I.2.*

<sup>281</sup> *ADI, I.3.*

<sup>282</sup> *ADI, I.4.*

customary. We as a village will be responsible if there is any trouble during this time.<sup>283</sup>

In another *iqrarnama* submitted the following year (11.03.1948) in a Kanker State stamped paper, the villagers of Chivranj represented themselves through Babji Gond and others in the following manner:

We are taking Chhote Pat, who lives in the palace of the senior Rajmata, to our village. There is a lack of peace (*ashanti*) in our village. We agree that we will accept whatever arrangement Chhote Pat makes for our village. We will not allow any manner of disorder. We are making Chhote Pat, Sone Kunwar Devi of Nawagaon and Bal Kunwar Devi of Kodejunga our *panch*. We will conduct worship according to custom and whoever is guilty according to the investigation (*tafsil*) will be responsible for worship or else will face punishment (*dand*) decided by the *panch*.<sup>284</sup>

Finally, in an undated *iqrarnama* on a Kanker State stamped paper, Bhav Singh Gond of Urkuda village wrote on behalf of his village:

We are the people (*bashinde*) of the state of Kanker. The arrangement of our village is not good. Because of the internal problem (*aafat*) among gods, the people and cattle of the village are suffering loss (*nuksan*). We therefore want to take Chhote Pat anga dev of Kanker State and palace for the restoration of the proper arrangement of our village. If Chhote Pat objects (*apatti*) to anything or anyone, and if anyone is found guilty, he will be liable for punishment. We will look after Chhote Pat as per everyone's advice.<sup>285</sup>

It will help to summarize and analyze the content of these *iqrarnama*. All the supplicants requested permission to take Chhote Pat to their villages. Chhote Pat was said to be residing in the palace of the dowager queen or Rajmata that was also recognized as the main palace or Rajbada.<sup>286</sup> The supplicants stated that the intervention of Chhote Pat

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<sup>283</sup> *ADI*, 1.5.

<sup>284</sup> *ADI*, 1.6.

<sup>285</sup> *ADI*, 1.7.

<sup>286</sup> After assuming ruling powers, Bhanu Pratap Deo took up residence in the bungalow of the erstwhile Political Agent that subsequently became the new palace. Komal Deo's surviving wife Shivnandini Devi, the Rajmata, lived in the Rajbada. Chhote Pat's temple was situated in the Rajbada complex.

was needed to resolve various problems faced by them. These problems were described as crisis and lack of peace in the village, the disturbance or undoing of the proper arrangement and configuration of gods, of the village and of family, internal trouble among gods, the illness of people and cattle, and the spell of wizards and witches.

Chhote Pat was expected to resolve these problems by investigating the matter at hand, pointing out the cause of these problems, including the identification of wizards and witches engaged in causing harm, restoring or making the proper arrangement of gods, and of the village and family, and bringing peace to the village. He was either expected to do this alone or with other *anga dev* who would together form the *panch*, the decision-making group, for the case in question. There is also the suggestion of a *panch* of notable people from the village to whom the findings of Chhote Pat would be submitted for action. The supplicants resolved to sort out the matter without any trouble and disorder. They undertook to do whatever was required to solve the problem including punishing wrongdoers. They were also obliged to propitiate Chhote Pat as was customary. In one of the *iqrarnama*, the supplicants state that Chhote Pat was being requisitioned because the Kanker State had given him for the people.

From a study of the more numerous and better-preserved *iqrarnama* of the decades from the 1950s to 1990s, one can get a more extensive view of the practices described above.<sup>287</sup> These *iqrarnama* are printed on the stamped paper of the Government of India. They contain applications from not just the villages of the former territory of princely Kanker but also from that of princely Bastar and the Chhattisgarh Agency, namely those in the districts of Dhamtari, Durg and Raipur. A major difference

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<sup>287</sup> *Anga Dev Iqrarnama, Series 2-6, 1949-2010*, Kanker: Private Collection, Kanker Palace Library.



between them and the *iqrarnama* of the colonial-princely regime is that whereas in the latter the supplicants undertake not to cause any trouble or disorder, in the former they assure the royal authority to whom the application is made, Bhanu Pratap Deo or Udai Pratap Deo, that they will ensure that Chhote Pat does not get into trouble because of these practices.

In all other details, the post-1948 *iqrarnama* follow the same pattern of petitioning as the *iqrarnama* of the colonial-princely regime. The applicants may be whole villages, or a family, or even one person. Most of these *iqrarnama* deal with issues and problems similar to those in the 1940s *iqrarnama*. Apart from the problems mentioned in the *iqrarnama* of the 1940s, the most common problem stated in these later *iqrarnama* are the wrath of gods (*daivi prakop*), drought (*akaal*) and the bad condition of cultivable land (*khet-khar kharab hai*), conflict within villages (*apasi kalah, bhed-bhav, phoot*), theft, the illness of children and missing persons. In many cases of theft, important village gods or their ornaments are reported stolen.

In other problems related to village gods, Chhote Pat is asked to identify the location of gods within the village so that the villagers could have a sense of their proper arrangement and configuration, vital for the peace of the village. In one *iqrarnama* from 1966, from the village of Sakarwara, the villagers complained that the village god (*gram devta*) was troubling the village and that the “business of gods” in the village was spoiled (*gramin devta ka karobar bigda hua hai*).<sup>288</sup> Most of these later *iqrarnama* mention investigation or *jaanch* as the method through which Chhote Pat would divine and resolve the problem, whether it is the *jaanch* of persons or gods. They also speak of how they would choose the *panch* for each case as required from among villagers and village

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

gods and that their decision would be binding on all. Although the position/rank of the main petitioners is seldom mentioned, except in some cases where the term *gaita* is suffixed to the name, the petitioners speak on behalf of the whole village. There are a large number of signatures, often scores, in many of the *iqrarnama* submitted on behalf of the entire village. In one *iqrarnama* from the 1950s from Padampur, in a case involving theft, the villager-suplicants state that they give Chhote Pat the right (*adhikar*) to go wherever he pleases in the village and its jungles to find the culprit.

Among the post-1948 *iqrarnama*, I found two that went into the details of the activities described in them. These *iqrarnama* are important because they tell us exactly what these activities were. The first of these is titled *karyakram vivran* or “description of program” and is dated 2.19.79.<sup>289</sup> It reads as follows in translation: again, the parentheses and italics are mine:

We villagers of Manjhicharra and Haliya appoint five *panch* and request them that they should fulfill their duty by asking Chhote Pat Anga Dev Rajmata-bada Kanker to conduct a weeding (*chhantni*) of gods according to custom. Questions: 1. Is Shitala in her place or under someone’s spell? 2. Where is Thakur Dev and where is his place? 3. Where is Anna Kunwari? Please show her to the *panch*. 4. Where are Sahda, Maoli, Chhapar and Gharsa? Please have them investigated. 5. How many types of land/soil (*mati*) are there? Which is true and which is false? Show us their place. 6. What kinds of goddesses are in the pond? Kindly get them weeded and tell us the cause. 7. Please get Rao, Pat and Seema and other gods and goddesses weeded. 8. Who is the main *pujari* of this place? Get him to stand in front of the *panch*. 9. Please present those men in the village who do wizardry and witchcraft and play around with gods and goddesses. 10. Please do a weeding of the gods and goddesses of every house and (re)make them. The above-mentioned things should be done to our satisfaction. If anybody is dissatisfied with this he should have the right (*adhikar*) to speak before the villagers. Therefore we villagers request the *panch* and the *pujari* of Chhote Pat to attend to the weeding of gods and goddesses, the state of our farms and fields and cattle and to purify (*shuddh karavana*) our village.

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

In this *iqrarnama* the villagers request the village *panch* and Chhote Pat to make/remake/restore the proper arrangement of the village in which the place and health of the gods and goddesses associated with various aspects of village life like Anna Kunwari (goddess of food/grain/crop) and Seema (goddess of territory) have got undone/disturbed/corrupted. By *chhantni* (weeding), the *iqrarnama* refer to the process of removing deities who have either been corrupted or rendered ineffective.

In another *iqrarnama* dated April 2, 1965, members of a family of Gond and Gada (a sept of Gonds) *gaita* of Largaon confessed to having stolen goddesses Hinglajin and Shitala, two pre-eminent village deities and undertook to make amends.<sup>290</sup> The main admission reads as follows:

I, Mansa Ram, son of Tuka Ram, caste Gada am from Largaon Markatola...Out of five brothers, I have been looking after the ancestral gods of my family. I committed a mistake (*galti*) as a result of which there has been trouble in the village that the *Panch*, Chhote Pat and Danteshwari have pointed out. I had taken Shitala and Hinglajin under my control out of ill feelings (*bairasu*), stole them and hid them in the farmstead (*kothar*) of Bhav Singh Thakur. Today the gods pointed this out. I accept this mistake and undertake never to repeat it and to offer worship to all the gods, host a *jatra* for them and to compensate whoever has suffered a loss as a result of my activities. I say this in my full senses and in front of witnesses.

In all the *iqrarnama*, whether of the colonial period or after, Chhote Pat emerges as a powerful entity whose help and intervention is sought by the people in the many problems and events that form the everyday vicissitudes of their lives. Chhote Pat is part of a cosmos in which these villages and their people are located, one that has its own field of forces in which gods and human beings are connected through complex and negotiated arrangements. The intervention of Chhote Pat is critical to this cosmos and the princely regime can be seen as facilitating this intervention even if this intervention has first to be

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

sought and allowed by the people. There is however little else in the *iqrarnama* that allows us to understand this phenomenon more fully. The administrative records are silent on this matter.

I believe that the *iqrarnama*, in which the faceless subject peoples of the administrative records emerge as recognizable persons, with their beliefs and practices, problems and concerns, give us a different view of the colonial-princely regime and its subjects from the formal, rationalist one assiduously produced in the administrative records. In the *iqrarnama*, which are legal and therefore statist documents, the colonial-princely regime appears as a rational arbiter of popular cultural-religious activities. In fact, at the end of all the *iqrarnama*, the administration can be seen warning the supplicants to desist from any *gadbadi* (trouble) and *danga-fasad* (disorder/violence-rioting) in the conduct of their activities. Yet, the *iqrarnama* broaden the horizon and draw the princely regime into the midst of real people, with names and palpable problems and issues. They allow us to posit a set of relations that potentially challenge the colonial-princely regime's claim to sovereign power and authority as represented in the administrative records.

Chhote Pat intervened in aspects of the life of the people which by the colonial-princely regime's own admission were its designated areas of competence: health, justice, law and order, cultivation and the general good of the people. Chhote Pat was apparently able to reach the people where rational administration failed to do so. Further the administration facilitated this intervention. From this it seems that the domain of the "state" had ceded space to Chhote Pat and other forces of a cosmos very different from and inadmissible into that of rational administration. Who was the Chhote Pat and why

was he in the custody of the colonial-princely administration? What powers did Chhote Pat have for the people, and the “state” did not, which allowed Chhote Pat this access into the world of the people? Or, by having custody of Chhote Pat, was the colonial-princely regime hoping to control or share powers that resided elsewhere, away from and beyond the domain of the “state” as represented by itself? What was this power-filled cosmos that seemed to exceed the realm of the “state” and force an acknowledgement from it? What was this popular location of power that the “state” negotiated with (as seen in the *iqrarnama*) but also othered (as in the silence about this in the administrative records)?

Except in the *iqrarnama*, Chhote Pat was not mentioned in the colonial-princely regime’s administrative records at all. Even though the *iqrarnama* provide us with a critical opening into the world of the *anga dev*, they do not take us very far. Is it possible, as Bourdieu argues, to escape the “thought of the state,” to think outside the “state” which thinks itself through those who attempt to think it?<sup>291</sup> We have already read the stories of Mansai Darro in which we see the popular understanding of who Chhote and Bade Pat were and how they came to be with the raja. For an account of the popular practices of the *anga dev*, to learn about its salience for the colonial-princely regime and the political aspects of the life of the Gond people in general, we need to turn elsewhere. We need to look to the *anga dev* practices themselves and to understandings of the past that inform them. In other words, we need to access another archive, another language, consciousness and cosmos distinct from the archive of the “state,” and from its language of stateness. The following chapters deal with my engagement with the world of the *anga dev*. Much that has been discussed in the last section will be fleshed out in them for a

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<sup>291</sup> Bourdieu, “Rethinking the state,” quoted in Blom Hansen and Stepputat, *States of Imagination*, 5.

proper understanding of the *anga dev*-rāja phenomenon is difficult without a study of the world of village society and the *anga dev*.

## Chapter 4

### The King as “I” and Other Notes on Ethnography

This chapter consists of general reflections on my fieldwork, a discussion of the meaning and implications of my double location in the field as historian and raja, and comments on the nature of popular accounts of the world of the *anga dev* and of its past encountered during fieldwork. I conducted my fieldwork between the December of 2010 and the summer of 2012. I had undertaken two short spells of preliminary field research in the winter of 2009-10 and in the summer of 2010 prior to this. Of course, my fieldwork was not my first encounter with the *anga dev* cosmology and practices. My early socialization, however reluctant, into the milieu of the *anga dev*, and later participation (2000-2007) in the *anga dev* practices as raja, had given me a certain preliminary familiarity with my subject that informed my work in the field.

Most of the fieldwork was conducted primarily in the villages of the Kanker district where the *anga dev* and related deities reside. These deities are also worshipped in the urban and semi-urban areas of the district, comprising the town of Kanker, which is the district headquarters, and the *tehsil* towns of the district. I therefore explored the *anga dev* practices in these sites as well. Apart from this, a large number of villagers visited me in the palace at Kanker and therefore many accounts took shape in the Darbar Hall where I received and conversed with the villagers. I also looked closely at the sacred geography of the Kanker town, the capital of the princely state, and to some extent of Bansla, the capital of the Kandra dynasty.

My fieldwork was conducted from the location of a historian who is also the “raja.” Though I always made it a point to inform my interlocutors that I was studying the

history of the *anga dev* communities and their practices, I was always already the raja in their eyes. Though after 1971 the term raja has no legal standing, it has continued to be used by most people in Kanker to address in particular the eldest male and in general all the male members of the former ruling family. The terms I was addressed by in this context were “raja/raja sahib,” “Maharajadhiraj”<sup>292</sup> and “raja-maharaj.” In my absence, my younger brothers Surya and Ashwini have been addressed in these terms. When all three of us were present, in distinction to the term raja that was used for me, the terms “rajkumar,” “maharajkumar” and “kumar sahib,” all of them meaning “prince,” were specifically used for my brothers.

These terms represent a form of respect to perceived superior status for scions of the royal family that “ruled” Kanker for nearly five and a half centuries until 1947. These terms still attribute to us political power and influence of a general kind, deriving from my family’s history as rulers and from the recognition of this fact by persons and structures of present-day state and government, among them elected representatives of Kanker at various levels, the local administration and the police.

Most importantly, the term raja located me as one of the primary figures in the conceptualization, history, enactment and sustenance of the *anga dev* cosmology and practices. The figure of the raja was central to the efficacy of the *anga dev* cosmology and practices as an entity whose powers had in the first place been part of the complex of forces that the cosmology and practices were based on. In this sense, my family and I could still bring to bear the powers of the former rajas of Kanker that were foundational to and inhered in the world of the *anga dev*. While I will demonstrate this as I go along, a

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<sup>292</sup> The colonial title for the feudatory chief of Kanker, literally “king of kings.”



particularly telling example of it was that in many instances, I, as raja, was asked to meet persons who were ill in order that they might heal, or even more poignantly, when I was asked to meet persons who were on their death-bed, so that having met me they could die in peace.

The formal structures and functionaries of the post-colonial nation state do not engage with the *anga dev* practices and cosmology in any serious way, but construct them, as we have seen, at best as exotic culture and at worst as superstition. Even though politicians and bureaucrats participate in *anga dev* practices in their individual capacity, the nation state has not displaced the raja in the *anga dev* cosmology. Further, because statist discourses other the *anga dev* practices as superstition, the raja appears as a comparable authority that legitimates and in turn is legitimated by these practices.

The various notions of the raja and his powers are, of course, connected. My family's continued centrality in popular socio-cultural practices means that present-day political regimes seek its indulgence, just as the influence my family thus wields strengthens its continuing significance in popular practices. This becomes clear in the practices of the *madai* and Dasehra, and other socio-cultural practices involving the royal family that can be traced back to the time of the princely state. The *madai* is planned by an officially constituted district-level committee in which the representatives of the raja, local communities of Gonds centered around the *anga dev*, the district civil and police administration and the Kanker district *panchayat* and municipality participate. The date of the *madai* (which is a local holiday), and preparations for its safe and proper performance, are discussed in several meetings of this committee in preparation for the *madai*. Though the Dasehra festival at the palace is organized by the royal family and the

*anga dev* communities, the district administration provides the police *bandobast*; and the elected representatives of Kanker at all levels and the top echelons of the bureaucracy make it a point to attend the festivities, even when they are not specifically invited, one of which includes partaking of the *prasad* (ritual food offering, in this case of goat meat) which is cooked and served at a ceremonial lunch in the palace.

The continuing political importance of the notion of *raja*, not just in Kanker but elsewhere, is also the result of the fact that many princely families adapted quite successfully to the political life of the post-colonial state in order to maintain power and influence in the changed circumstances of the period after 1947. To begin with, Bhanu Pratap Deo, my grandfather and the last ruling chief of Kanker, had been a ruler of nationalist sympathies whose court had consisted of people who were actively involved in the national movement in Chhattisgarh.<sup>293</sup> Under their influence, Bhanu Deo introduced responsible government of a limited nature in 1944. He was also the first among Indian princes to sign the instrument of accession when several of his fellow-rulers, most notably Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo of Bastar, were prevaricating.<sup>294</sup> These events are remembered with great pride by the people in Kanker. Bhanu Deo pursued an active public life after 1947, even though he no longer had ruling powers. As in the case of many other former princes, he contested and won elections in 1952 and 1962 to the Legislative Assembly of the state of Madhya Pradesh into which the princely state of Kanker had been incorporated.<sup>295</sup> In 1957, his sister Pratibha Devi was also elected to the

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<sup>293</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 138.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.; Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 194-95.

<sup>295</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 138.

state legislature.<sup>296</sup> Bhanu Deo is also remembered for many acts of social service he continued to perform with his much reduced income after 1947, one of which was the establishment, with great difficulty, of the first college in southern Chhattisgarh in 1952. This college, now known by his name, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary last year.

After 1967, the seat for the Member of Legislative Assembly for Kanker was reserved for candidates of the Scheduled Tribes (STs). In the elections for the seat of the Member of Parliament (MP) from Kanker, which was reserved for ST candidates from the very beginning, it was Bhanu Deo's associates or handpicked candidates who contested and won until the late 1990s.<sup>297</sup> After Bhanu Deo's death in 1969, the reservation of all the MLA and MP seats in Kanker for ST candidates, and the passing away of the first generation of tribal leaders from the time of Bhanu Deo, my family has had much less involvement with public life and electoral politics. Yet Bhanu Deo's successful transformation into a nationalist politician in the post-colonial situation has facilitated the perception that my family is never too far from political power, and that the raja was not really passed over in 1947 but is still around and potentially powerful.

Many present-day politicians and bureaucrats draw from and contribute to the force and longevity of the idioms of *raj-shahi* (rule of raja) even if they represent the very different polity of the post-colonial nation state. One instance of this is seen in the *jan-adalat* (people's court) that was held in Bhanupratap-pur in 2007. In this, a group of people petitioned the presiding officer, in this case none other than Chhattisgarh's Chief

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ram Prasad Potai, a close associate of Bhanu Deo, became the first MP of Kanker in 1950. Arvind Netam and his wife, again from a family chosen by Bhanu Deo, were MPs for several terms beginning in 1971 until the late 1990s. See "Great Men," *North Bastar-Kanker District Administration official website*.

Minister, for the return of Chhote Pat. The Chief Minister held court (*darbar*) and dispensed raja-like justice. Local politicians seek legitimacy by associating themselves with and supporting popular socio-cultural practices like that of the *anga dev* through positions that recall and often duplicate royal ones. They often provide donations for *jatra* and for the upkeep and restoration of shrines and have their names printed in pamphlets commemorating the *anga dev* events as *sanrakshak* (patron), in conformity with and alongside the name of the raja.

In the case of Bhangaram, Lambodar Balihar, elected several times over as MLA and MP from Keshkal, had virtually taken over the management of the *jatra* of Bhangaram and Kunwar Pat *anga dev* and put himself in the position of the raja of Bastar in the conduct of these practices. He had first been initiated into the activities of Bhangaram by Vedwati, Pravir Chandra's wife and the last queen of Bastar, to whom he remained loyal until her death in the mid-1980s. In Kanker, similarly, the *madai* in the village of Umaradah does not begin until one of its sons, Arvind Netam, the longest serving MP of Kanker and probably its senior-most politician, propitiates the village *anga dev* and leads the *madai* procession. In Bhanupratap-pur, local politicians have completely taken over the role of the raja in the Dasehra and *anga-dev* practices.

Given the many senses of power that attach to the figure of the raja, *anga dev* communities that associate with the royal family often use its potential as a historical counter-point, especially in the context of supra-local *anga dev* practices like the *madai*, Dasehra, *jatra*, etc., to voice disaffection against and create platforms for negotiations with the many representatives of the post-colonial state on matters ranging from public works in villages and recognition for local religio-cultural practices to forest policies. The

raja in these instances becomes an alternative locus to established state authorities and is used in political negotiations with them. As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, the Dasehra has emerged as a particularly important site for the gathering of *anga dev* communities for such mobilizations. The various *baithak* or meetings that precede the main Dasehra function are attended by the *siyan* of hundreds of villages and opportunities for wider discussion and subsequent action on issues agitating the villagers are taken up with great enthusiasm. More recently, the Dasehra *baithak*, and meetings following it, have considered organizing more systematically and regularly.

Manohar Netam's initiative is another example of the potentially politically unifying and contestatory nature of the *anga dev*-raja complex vis-à-vis contemporary political structures and practices. This is not to suggest that the Gond peoples in Kanker are not mobilizing at other fora. I will later write about the ways in which other politico-cultural mobilizations and initiatives draw from and interact with the *anga-dev* –raja practices. During my visits to the villages, there was scarcely any instance in which the *siyan* did not ask me to intervene on their behalf or facilitate a dialogue with the administration on issues of concern to them. My presence as raja in my field of study was therefore never just an academic or cultural one, but one imbued with many kinds of political valence.

Popular mobilizations around the *anga dev*-raja complex have gathered strength after 2000, the year of the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh. This happened to coincide very nearly with my father's death in 2001. Despite my reluctance to revive the Dasehra ceremony at the palace (and my brothers, who manage my family's estate in Kanker, were not particularly enthusiastic either because of the expenses it entails), the

*siyan* prevailed upon my family to restore the ceremony to what they recalled was its former grandeur. This period has also seen the increasing intervention of the post-colonial state in the lives of the people (especially with the addition to the personnel of governance through the creation of new districts and block-level administrative apparatus), the rapid implementation of development policies that seek to radically reorganize the landscape and economy of the villages, and the consequent rise in popular political activity and resistance, including violent insurgency, to the state. The enthusiasm for Dasehra and the political activity that accompanies it is reflective of growing popular disaffection against present-day political regimes and their policies; and even if the raja is reduced to a merely ceremonial figure in these activities, the idea of raja is often the pivot around which developments in this context are centered. It is from this power-laden location that I commenced my fieldwork.

As soon as it became known in the *madai* of January 2011 that I would be in Kanker for at least a year, *nyota* (invitations) to local *madai*, *jatra* and other functions started pouring in. I was told that in many of these ceremonies in the past years, the presence of the raja had been sorely missed. After the death of my father, it was either Chhote Pat, as the raja's *anga dev*, or my brother Surya, who had represented me at these events. In the villages where *jatra* are not annually held, I was invited to visit in any case, to renew and strengthen old ties. Since I had hardly ever been in Kanker for any substantial length of time after my father passed away, I was asked to come and meet the gods because as I was often admonished, after all these were *my* gods as well (*akhir ye devi-devta tumhar ghala bhi to hai*). Apart from *anga dev* and related events, I was invited to a large number of other events, ranging from camps of the National Service

Scheme<sup>298</sup> and annual functions in schools to Manas-Gaan competitions,<sup>299</sup> and the annual meeting of Netam's initiative on traditional medicine to village marriage ceremonies.

The schedule of my field visits therefore took shape along the lines of these invitations and the calendar of *anga dev* and related events. I followed these up with additional visits when I found that there were certain things that I needed to pursue or investigate further. One example of these situations was that concerning the origin story of the Gonds. In Palewa, at the shrine of *anga dev* Patwan Dokra, one of the seven originary Gond brothers, I was given an account of the birth of the Gonds. After my visit to Palewa, I felt that it would aid my understanding if I could go to the shrines of the other brothers as well, especially to those in or near Kanker: Thema, Murdongri and Semurgaon. Here I must stress that the royal family's ties to the people in the villages has been maintained primarily through *anga dev* and related practices so that although I ended up visiting the villages for a variety of reasons, often seemingly unconnected to the deity practices, it is the raja's role in these practices that was the starting and anchoring point of my forays into the villages.

In most cases, a few *siyan* representing the village came to formally invite me. They often approached me through Bhagtu Ram Patel, the second of the three sons of the *gaita/pujari* of Chhote Pat, who accompanies Chhote Pat in his visits to the villages. Bhagtu thus became a regular companion during my field trips. Bhagtu, a young man of thirty five and a graduate is, like his father, completely devoted to the Chhote Pat, even though by present-day official caste classification, as a Patel, he is not a Gond but from

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<sup>298</sup> National Service Scheme official website, <http://nss.nic.in/intro.asp> (accessed January 2, 2013).

<sup>299</sup> Musical recitations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Tulsidas' *Ramacharitamans*.

an Other Backward Caste (OBC). In Kanker, the Patel caste has traditionally been associated with vegetable farming.

Bhagtu is well-informed of local matters and well-connected with village communities, partly because of his travels with Chhote Pat. He is ambitious and has unsuccessfully fought a *panchayat* election in his village of Nadanmara. He continues to engage in several public or social activities. One of these is his work for the *Van Adhikar Samiti* (Forest Rights Committee), a Government of India initiative to involve local people in the determination of ownership of forest land arising out of the application of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006.<sup>300</sup> He is also an activist in another central government program, the *Sakshar Bharat Karyakram* (Program for Literate India), started last year, in which he teaches evening classes for children in the age group 6-14 who are out of school, and others in the age group 18-55 who want to gain literacy. Recently he has also joined the *Pichhda Varg Kalyan Manch* (PVKM) (Backward Castes Welfare Forum), an OBC group that mobilizes public opinion on and lobbies with the government for the rights of its constituency, often in opposition to the government's overwhelming focus on "tribal welfare."

His main source of income is a modest amount of agricultural land in his village that he shares and cultivates with his father and brothers, and remuneration obtained from working under the schemes of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment

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<sup>300</sup> For a discussion of the Forest Rights Act see "Forests and Tribals: A Symposium on the proposed bill recognizing tribal rights on forest lands," *Seminar* 552 (2005).



Guarantee Act.<sup>301</sup> Bhagtu knows the rural landscape of Kanker like the back of his hand and together with that, has a wealth of information about the *anga dev* communities and practices of the villages of Kanker. Not only did I gain a great deal of knowledge about their history from him, he was also quick to grasp the nature of my research and its particular requirements. Initially he was apprehensive about the idea of making my work public because he felt that the *anga dev* practices had mostly been dismissed as superstition. But as our research progressed and discussions increased, he became very keen to bring out what he called the “real picture.”

My brother Surya, known popularly in the villages as “Jolly baba” after the name affectionately used for him at home, was also an important part of my field trips. From the early 1990s, it is he who had been handling my family’s *anga dev* responsibilities, as indeed the much wider set of socio-cultural obligations of my family of which the *anga dev* are only one part. My father had groomed him to take over these responsibilities from him. After my father’s health declined in the early 1990s, Surya represented him in all the *anga dev* events across Kanker, as he has represented me since my father’s death in 2001. By the time I started my research, Surya, like Bhagtu, had accumulated a large store of knowledge about the *anga dev* communities and practices. Most importantly, he was well versed in the proper deportment for my family, learned from my father, not just in the *anga dev* ceremonies but also in the context of the raja’s general interaction with Kanker village society. Surya has also been working with Gond and other under-privileged groups in a variety of initiatives concerned with improving village life including health and sanitation, education, agriculture, forestry and wild life. He too connected quickly

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<sup>301</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act official website*, <http://nrega.nic.in> (accessed August 17, 2012).

with my research and its concerns, and often put my ideas to the test with his probing questions.

With Bhagtu and Surya, I found a consistent, sympathetic yet self-reflexive team for my fieldtrips that would not have been possible without their multi-dimensional logistical support, including transport and secretarial work. Together, with their knowledge and experience of village life and *anga dev* practices, Bhagtu and Surya “opened the door” for me into the world of the *anga dev*, allowing me to enter it with a level of ease and familiarity that would not have been possible otherwise in such a short time.<sup>302</sup>

On the day of the event to which I had been invited, I made sure that we drove to the host village well before the scheduled time so that I’d have the opportunity to survey the geographical setting of the village. Most of the villages I went to were off the main road, the National Highway 30, that runs north-south through the middle of the Kanker district, and are approached only by narrow and badly worn-out state highways and subsidiary roads. These villages were situated amidst sparse forests, on the banks of the many streams that flow across Kanker’s undulating topography, and are close to hills. Villages that are focused on one *anga dev*, and form an *anga dev pargana*, are usually situated along geographical alignments of hills, forests and rivers that make access by foot easy.

When visiting by prior arrangement, our party was usually stopped a little distance outside the village where a group of village *siyan*, both men and women, would

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<sup>302</sup> I take this formulation from the prelude in Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India: The Girl Child and the art of Playfulness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4, where Lal writes of her primary interlocutor as “opening the door” for her understanding of the life of young girls in 19<sup>th</sup> century elite Muslim households in North India.

receive us with traditional *puja* of the kind already mentioned in the case of the *madai* and the Dasehra. An additional act of *puja* consisted of washing the raja's feet with the water of the village rivers. We would then be led along the main path in the village, with drummers preceding us, to the venue of the event. This ceremony is referred to as *parghaana*, or the act of receiving and escorting, and marks a hierarchy between the person received and receiving. Often, during the *madai* or Dasehra in Kanker, when the *anga dev* and their *siyan* companions sulk at the palace gate, the raja either has to go in person or send his *raj-dand* to implore them to enter. While in the case of my welcome in the villages the raja seemed to have a higher position, in the case of the *madai* and Dasehra this hierarchy was often inverted.

When I attended an *anga dev* event on invitation and had not just turned up unexpectedly, the venue to which I was taken was the *dev-kothar*, the sacred place where the *anga dev* resided. The term *kothar* in Chhattisgarhi derives from the word *kothi*, a mud hut meant to store grain, and refers to a clearing amidst cultivated fields where the *kothi* is located, plough animals are tethered, implements are kept and various agricultural tasks like threshing, etc. are done.<sup>303</sup> *Kothar* is a place from which the rhythms of cultivation are controlled and managed. The *dev-kothar*, the residence of the most powerful ancestor, the *anga dev*, is the site from which, through rituals of propitiation, the smooth functioning of village life is achieved. It is not particular to the *anga dev* and other important deities can have their own *dev-kothar*. The *anga dev kothar* is in most cases a grove located on the outskirts of the village with small clearings here and there for other deities and for the performance of rituals. The best examples of large *dev-kothar*

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<sup>303</sup> Nandkumar and N. P. Kaushik, eds., *Chhattisgarhi Shabd Kosh* (Raipur: English Language Training Center, 2006), 60.

are those of Sone Kunwar *anga dev* in Bhawgir-Nawagaon and of Patwan Dokra *anga dev* in Palewa.

In the *dev-kothar* I was first expected to perform some rituals of propitiation for the ancestral deities and the ceremony in progress (a *jatra* is often 2-3 days long and I would be called for the main event on the last day) would temporarily be stopped to allow me to do so. I knew and was repeatedly told by the *siyan* that the raja was expected to propitiate the *anga dev* during his visit. Even when I was in the village for other events, I was first expected to perform ritual propitiation for the ancestors. For the duration of my stay in the village for any *anga dev* event, the *dev-kothar* was the most appropriate place for me to be in. The raja, it was evident, was best positioned with the deities. However on other occasion, when I was visiting for a different reason or unannounced, I was taken to the house of the *gaita* or *majhi*, the pre-eminent notables of the village.

My interlocutors were usually village elders/*siyan*, various village notables like the *gaita*, *majhi* and *sirha* and members of the village *panchayats* and higher elected representatives if they were present. The older *siyan* and village notables were charged with hosting me and were therefore my companions in the course of my visit to the villages. They gave me most of the accounts. *Siyan* women also contribute to the accounts although this happened mostly in household settings. During an unannounced visit to the shrine of Phul Kunwar *anga dev* in Malanjhkudum, we found that the *gaita* had gone to another village, and we ended up talking to his wife instead.<sup>304</sup> Between looking after her children and doing housework, she told us a lot about the ancestry and life of Phul Kunwar. Men who were not part of the village *baithak*, and adolescent boys, especially those helping in the organization of the event, would also often gather around

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<sup>304</sup> Conversation with Phul Kunwar *anga dev*'s *gaita* family, 06.02.12, Malanjhkudum.

us and participate in the conversation. I gradually became aware of the various hierarchies of the *bhumkal*, a subject I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

There were three kinds of overlapping accounts that developed in the course of my conversation with the *siyan*. Firstly, my visits to the villages produced a lot of general conversation (*gothiana*) about the visits of my grandfather and father. The villagers remembered most their hunting and camping trips, and recounted their hunting adventures. Secondly, although I was expected to know about the *anga dev* practices, I was often explained the meanings of particular deities and ceremonies. Along with my observation of events and relationships in the villages, these commentaries became the basis of my understanding of the world of the *anga dev*. I present a sketch of the world of the *anga dev* in the following chapter. Finally, these conversations eventually led to accounts about the past, about ancestors, gods and rajas: I discuss most of them in chapter six.

Though I was mindful of the fact that my presence was likely to lead to raja-related conversations and preclude others, I began eventually to encourage conversations centered around the raja, as this was precisely what I was interested in. The worries which I had about what might be hidden from me as raja were to some extent taken care of by the fact that these conversations hardly ever shied away from assertions directed at and discomforting to the raja. I continued listening carefully, however, for accounts not necessarily or primarily about the raja of Kanker because a large number of accounts of village and clan ancestors, important landmarks in the history of a village and remarkable episodes from the early life of the older people in the village had little to do with the raja.

Most of the accounts of the *pargana anga dev* did however involve the raja in some way or another.

In Kanker there is no separate genre of the accounts of the past like the *vadilcha goths* of the Dangis studied by Skaria that could be “learned” from the narrators as a distinct tradition and style.<sup>305</sup> There is no special category of persons who specialize in any tradition of the past as in the case of the Pradhan musicians of the Gond society of Mandla who are a repository of Gond folk-lore.<sup>306</sup> The Gada drummers do not constitute any such group of folk-lore practitioners. The *siyan*, especially the older among them as pointed out earlier, give most of the accounts of the past. The *majhi*, *gaita* and *sirha*, even if they are young men, are also knowledgeable about the past and keen to talk about it.

I was told by the villagers that evening-time casual conversations often involve giving accounts of the past, about the ancestors and the raja. In this sense, accounts of the past form a large pool of inherited tradition, some of which circulate quite widely throughout the territories of the former princely state of Kanker while others are restricted to clan or village communities. Young men and women, adolescent boys and girls, are the audience for these accounts. Young men, not yet members of the *baithak*, most of who assist the *gaita* with the daily rituals of propitiation, help organize *anga dev* events and *baithak*, and engage in social work in the village, perhaps the next generation of village leaders, are the most avid listeners of these stories. They often join the discussions and prod their elders on into telling this or that story they remember from

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<sup>305</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, 19-34.

<sup>306</sup> Roderic Knight, “The “Banna”: Epic Fiddle of Central India,” *Asian Music* 32, No. 1, Tribal Music of India (2000-1): 101.

earlier conversations from within the rhythms of village life. When I was visiting, they crowded around us quickly to listen to our conversations.

In the *anga dev* accounts of the past narrated to me, the past and the present were often collapsed together. As pointed out earlier, the *siyan* narrator would often project an account of the past into his own experience and vice-versa. When speaking of the raja and the ancestors, the narrators would sometimes point out the time of the account either in terms of generations before their own or the reign of a particular raja, and at other time conflate the time of different rajas and ancestors. I as raja was often recognized as one with my ancestors. Further, from what we have seen in the previous discussion of the world of the *anga dev*, the *time* of the ancestors, of gods and spirits, of the *bhumkal*, the raja and *angrez* are not separable in these accounts whose scope is trans-temporal. Unlike within history, these accounts do not separate what the historians distinguish as the “rational” and “irrational.” In these ways, the conception of time in the *anga dev* accounts is quite different from that of the historian: it is informed by but does not constrain itself within historical time.

That I was writing a history, or *itihās*, became a matter of great excitement and importance, and the *siyan* and the young both encouraged me to do so.<sup>307</sup> They contrasted me to the journalists who often come into their midst to cover events and expressed happiness that one of *them* would finally give an authentic (*sahi* or “true”) account of things. It was always the case that several people joined to give me an account, and the desire for the true account, where the narrators debated with each other and sorted things out, sometimes left me with a rich haul of divergent versions. Despite the concern for

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<sup>307</sup> I have taken permission from every one of my *anga dev* interlocutors to quote them in this project. When required, I have withheld the names of my interlocutors.

truth, and debates about the correct version, eventually neither the narrators nor the listeners appeared too concerned about resolving the gaps in a story or the many versions into one.

W. G. Archer has pointed out that “folk-tales” and “folk-lore” among tribal communities comprise “an assertion of the past, the conservation of a tribal way of life...and the building up of a moral tradition.”<sup>308</sup> Despite these insights into the nature of “tribal” expressions, and most importantly, because they constitute, as Banerjee has pointed out, “a self-conscious posturing vis-à-vis the world,” disciplinary history and anthropology have historically worked to culturize and therefore neutralize them.<sup>309</sup> According to Banerjee, “despite our recognition of this (of folk-tales being critical political expressions of another culture),<sup>310</sup> the image still plays out in our contemporary thought as a contrast between the rational, instrumentalist modern individual and the metaphorical and copiously story-telling “primitive”.<sup>311</sup>

Following Banerjee, I wish to argue that the *anga dev* accounts of the past among the *bhumkal* of the Kanker villages can be read as constituting a political assertion against historical discourses that produce the *bhumkal* as primitive and pre-political, as either unthinking rebels or innocent people requiring developmentalist guardianship of the state. These accounts bring into view an imagination of power, authority, sovereignty, political relationships and organization which is distinct from that of the historical and statist one. They constitute the everyday of the *bhumkal*, are woven into the daily rhythms of life,

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<sup>308</sup> W. G. Archer, “Comment,” *Man in India* XXIV, No. 4 (1944): 208.

<sup>309</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics,” 135.

<sup>310</sup> Parenthesis is mine.

<sup>311</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics,” 135.



and form an effective means of addressing the young about community traditions and their past, just as the historical style of the past is organized to normalize the “modern.” I will undertake here a presentation of the *anga dev* accounts as a political discourse that challenges and exceeds the strictures of the historical discipline in its construction of the past. These accounts constitute and posit an alternate politics where the *bhumkal* is agentive and centrally responsible in shaping its world.

Chakrabarty has drawn attention to the way in which agency is sought to be returned to the subaltern by historians.<sup>312</sup> In his analysis of Ranajit Guha’s history of Santal rebellion, Chakrabarty argues that the historian cannot give the Santal god the same agency in the narrative of rebellion that the Santals themselves do because to do so would not be “rationally defensible.”<sup>313</sup> The attention to subaltern accounts where gods and spirits are agentive could invite the charge that these accounts themselves deny agency to the subaltern. Even though I could say that in the *anga dev* accounts, through their ancestors, the *bhumkal* provide the most critical role to human or human-like actors, such a reply would tend to miss the point. Chakrabarty is pointing to the very act of subaltern self-presentation and construction of the past as agentive in a way that a historian’s representation does not allow. In fact it is precisely the way in which within the accounts of the Santal and the *bhumkal* gods and spirits become actors that the subaltern accounts posit their own terms of reference.

To the question of whether a recovery does not always involve mediation and does not necessarily transform the nature of the oral when it is written, and thus archived,

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<sup>312</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 104.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

the answer must be this. The choice we confront is either of writing histories in which the subaltern accounts are culturized and remain external to the main narrative, or of giving these accounts serious consideration as alternative engagements with the past that could provide the framework for the narrative even if we cannot avoid the act of interposition. My project embraces the latter option. To be sure these alternative engagements with the past continue to be informed by the historical even as they go beyond it.

I approach my project with the acute consciousness of the power-laden position of the raja through which I gain access to the *anga dev* practices and accounts, and the vision that I necessarily project onto others' accounts through my narrative as historian. I am aware that my project is located in and enacts multiple relationships of power. I have to recognize the necessarily "partial, committed and incomplete"<sup>314</sup> character of my vision and the coherence I impose on the *anga dev* practices and accounts. Further, I realize that the accounts I present are only a small part of the accounts that people give each other, and gave me. They are also part of an ever-moving, changing landscape of relationships and expressions because societies hardly ever "hold still for their portraits."<sup>315</sup> Rather than claiming to give voice to my interlocutors, I see myself standing adjacent and listening to them, and offering one interpretation of what they told me.

Yet self-reflexivity need not lead to paralyzing self-absorption and to the resignation that nothing can be certainly said or known. As J. N. Mohanty has pointed out, the argument for resignation in this context is circular and specious: we begin with the assumption of radically separated worlds/cultures to suggest that understanding

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<sup>314</sup> I take these formulations from James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 10.

between them is not possible.<sup>316</sup> Because we believe that understanding is not possible, the impasse between what we see as radically different cultures remains. Mohanty argues that worlds/cultures are never pure, homogeneous and hermetically sealed off from each other but co-constitutive so that the strange is often present within just as the familiar can be found outside.<sup>317</sup> It is the same kind of argument that has been put forward by Chakrabarty in the context of the separation of the “rational” and the “irrational.”<sup>318</sup>

Nothing illustrates the point better than my double identity as raja and historian-ethnographer, or more correctly, the impossibility of separating these identities. Although I can not claim to have become an “insider,” I also wonder if I can pose as an objective “outsider.” I argue that it is the irreducibly plural nature of our selves that affords us the possibility of dialogue, a possibility that we should not dismiss easily. I therefore view my project as dialogic, one that is shaped by a dialogue between aspects of my self, and between my interlocutors and me. I am as much a storyteller who is telling a story to myself about myself as I am a storyteller of other people’s stories.<sup>319</sup> If I “fashion” the world of the *anga dev*, I too get fundamentally “re-fashioned” in this process.<sup>320</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction, far from being a historian-ethnographer confidently representing the world of the *anga dev*, its practices and accounts of the past, I now think of

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<sup>316</sup> Mohanty, *The Self*, 117.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>318</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 97-113.

<sup>319</sup> Garro and Mattingly argue that an ethnographer attempts to be “a good story teller of other people’s stories.” See Linda C. Garro and Cheryl Mattingly, “Narrative as Construct and Construction,” in *Narrative and Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, ed. L. C. Garro and C. Mattingly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>320</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretations of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15.

myself as a traveler on a border-crossing, struggling to come to terms with the heterogeneity of the world I inhabit but often do not acknowledge.

It is with these reflections, but also hope that I might at least begin to intimate our other lives that I turn to the next two chapters. In the next chapter, I attempt to sketch the world of the *anga dev* as I saw it during my participation in the *anga dev* practices. In the subsequent chapter, I narrate the accounts of the past given to me by my interlocutors.

## Chapter 5

### The World of the Anga Dev: A Field of Forces

Before we turn to the *anga dev* accounts of the past in which an alternative view of polity and sovereignty in princely Kanker are constructed, it is critical to understand the world of *anga dev* in which they take shape and are embedded. What in other words are the realms and relationships of power, authority and sovereignty that derive from and in turn reproduce the *anga dev* practices? I attempt in this chapter to explore these realms and relationship comprising ancestral spirits, gods and the people which the dominant discourses other in various ways as “primitive culture and religion,” of little consequence to the domain of a narrowly defined “political;” and to study their relationship with the realm of the raja which, as we have seen, claims the distinction of “state.”

In the history he constructed, while describing the world of the *anga dev*, Manohar Netam had argued that the balance of the *bhum* (land/world) was forged at the time of the settlement of the villages by the ancestors who propitiated – negotiated with and stabilized – the various forces of the *bhum*. This balance has since had to be constantly maintained by the *bhumkal* (people of the land) through the propitiation of the various ancestral and non-ancestral forces of the *bhum*. Netam saw the powers of the raja as conditional on his participation in but also critical to the maintenance of this balance.

Following Netam’s proposition, I see the world of the *anga dev* as a “field of forces.”<sup>321</sup> This is a field which, comprising interconnected realms of power centered on ancestral and non-ancestral deities, the notion and hierarchies of the *bhumkal*, and the regime of the raja, takes shape around the organizing principle of a balance between these

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<sup>321</sup> The Chhattisgarhi term used by the *anga dev* communities for forces/powers that be is *shakti* (plural, *shaktiyan*).

forces, a balance crucial for the sustenance of the life of the *bhumkal*. This field of forces is inflected by relatively newer discourses of Hinduization and indigeneity; and by local and supra-local politico-economic processes, practices, organizations and functionaries of the post-colonial nation state. In what follows I look closely at the various actors in this field of forces, the powers they wield and regimes they create, the relationships between them and the manner in which a balance of power among them is achieved.

I begin by exploring the nature of the ancestral and non-ancestral deities of the *bhum* and their regimes of power. Here I also look at the nature of deification and the often simplified distinction between the “divine” and the “human” that disciplinary discourses make. In addition, I mark the ways in which the gender of these deities of the *bhum* is constructed. I then turn to the peoples on whom the onus of dealing with the forces of *bhum* lies: the *bhumkal*. I attend to notion of the *bhumkal* as community; and to other notions of community and identity, especially the discourses of caste-tribe, tribal-non-tribal, tribal-Hindu distinctions, as they relate to the *bhumkal*. I ask whether and how exposure to the world outside the villages and modern education impact the *bhumkal*.

I then study the hierarchies of age, gender, ritual function, and of old and newer political and economic status that constitute the *bhumkal*. I look at traditional and post-colonial village-level institutions of self-government, their relationship and the impact of this relationship on *anga dev* practices. I also mark the ways in which elected representatives from among village society relate to *anga dev* practices. I study the ways in which upper caste Brahmin and Rajput elements in village society have got integrated into the *anga dev* practices; and how the traditional political Brahmin-Kshatriya complex has a secondary role in the polity of Kanker. All through these discussions, and a separate

section later, I mark the role of the raja as a force in relation to the ancestral and non-ancestral deities, and the *bhumkal*. Finally I look at the meaning of harmony and balance in the world of the *anga dev*, and at how this is achieved and maintained through the participation of all the actors discussed earlier.

My understanding of the world of the *anga dev* presented here took shape in the course of my field work where I participated in the *anga dev* practices and interacted with various sections of the *bhumkal*. Although divided into sections devoted to each category of actor within the *anga dev* world, my discussion moves back and forth between sections/actors as it is difficult to neatly separate one from the other. The various issues signaled in the preceding paragraphs also cut across several sections/actors and hence are broached as required. I often turn to Grigson and Elwin, colonial anthropologist-administrators whose writings comprise the most comprehensive and authoritative previous understandings of the world of the Gond society available to us, to reflect on certain details of what I have to say. Netam's history serves as the guiding narrative: I keep it in view and return to it continuously. His account was the most comprehensive and self-conscious one among those I encountered in the field. In one way or another, the underlying principles of Netam's history animated almost all the accounts I received.

### **Ancestral Forces**

The ancestral forces play a key role in the popular conception of the world. The Gonds variously deify all their ancestors. The deified ancestors are the most important deities of the Gonds, and the *anga dev* among them, the most significant not just to the Gonds but the entire village of mixed Gond and caste population. The importance and deification of the ancestors stems from their role in forging the initial and generationally

maintained balance of the *bhum* which makes the life of the *bhumkal* possible and smooth. In continuing to propitiate the forces of the *bhum*, the *bhumkal* draw on the experience of their ancestors. In their ability to bring their experience into play, the ancestors themselves become the most important forces of the *bhum*, are deified, attributed super-human powers, worshiped and propitiated.

After the death of a person, the spirit of the deceased does not go away but as narrated beautifully by Manohar Netam in his history, is retrieved, deified and re-established among the *bhumkal* in different forms. The ancestors are referred to as *purkhe* in general, by their particular names if these are known and by terms denoting other remarkable aspect of their life, death or circumstance of retrieval.

There are different levels of deification of the ancestral forces according to their abilities and reach; and the various forms that the returned ancestors take corresponds to these levels. All ancestors are first deified at the level of the family. The spirit of the deceased, both male and female, is put into a *handiya* (clay pot) and joined to that of the other ancestors. There is a room in the house in which the pot of the ancestors is kept. Sometimes, a special hut is built on the side of the main house for the ancestral pot.<sup>322</sup> The pot is surrounded by a host of attendant objects like clay and brass human and animal figurines, wooden and metal implements and weapons like axe, plough, spear, etc. There is also a hearth next to the ancestral pot where on all occasions important for the family ritual food is cooked, offered as *prasad* (ritual food) to the family's ancestral deities and then shared among the members of the family.

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<sup>322</sup> Grigson and Elwin found the Gondi-Halbi term *hanal kunda* meaning the "pot of the departed" being used among the Marias and Murias of Bastar. Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 222-225; Elwin, *The Muria*, 158.



The second level of deification is that of ancestors who are of importance to the entire village. Chief among them, and generic, are *bhumihar dev* (founder of the village), *thakur dev* (primary landholder), *bada dokra* (elder man) and *budha dokra* (old man). Often these terms refer to the same ancestor, at other times many ancestors are collapsed into one. In their various forms or together, this set of deified ancestors is linked to the first breaking of soil for cultivation and settlement. Most of the villages in Kanker were first settled by the Gonds and have a Gond majority, so that these deities are almost always Gonds. The various clans and castes in a village often project the memory of their first ancestors on to these deities. Often, other and later ancestors of the village, who became important for various reasons, are also conflated with them. These conflations, as also those of family ancestors, result from the belief that the various generations of ancestors merge into each other and form a continuous sequence of being. Many times, while giving an account about their ancestors, the *siyan* would project themselves back into time and their ancestors into the present, so that various generations merged and the distinction between past and present disappeared.

Although the ancestral deities at this level are usually male, there are a few female deities like *budhi dai* and *budhi dokri* (both terms meaning “old mother”) as well. While most of the time male and female deities are clearly separate entities, there are instances in which a deity is sometimes recognized as male and at other times as female. There are a few cases when one ancestral deity is seen to be a couple of male and female ancestors, or one in which both aspects are indistinguishably combined. The case of the *thakur* deity demonstrates all these cases. The most common iteration of this deity is male, *thakur dev*.

However, sometimes the deity is referred to as *thakur dai*, in which case it either becomes female or is a couple, or might even have both aspects combined inseparably.

While speaking of the cults of the male clan god and the village mother goddess, Grigson noted how the Marias were often unmindful of the distinctions of gender and made the one stand in for the other.<sup>323</sup> He also mentioned that the male and female elements tended to merge in the figure of *bhum* or the “Earth God.”<sup>324</sup> In his study of the Raj-Gonds of Hyderabad, Furer-Haimendorf complained that he had “never been able to make a Gond quite see the inconsistency in their description of two divine figures, one male and one female as one.”<sup>325</sup>

The *budha dokra* and *budhi dokri*, especially when they are considered as clan founders, are also frequently referred to as Mahadeo/Shiv and Parvati, who dominant discourses identify as primarily “Sanskritic” deities, signs of either the corruption of an authentic “tribal” religion or its essentially “Hindu” nature. Among most of the villagers however, neither of these views are significant concerns. In many Gond accounts of their origin, especially those centered on Lingo Pen, the Gonds were born of Mahadeo and Parvati.<sup>326</sup> The ancestral deities at this level appear in a variety of forms ranging from large stones to axes and spears. They inhabit a range of places: the family house of the main lineage, the *anga dev kothar*, the village ossuary, the cultivated fields or *koh* (caves) in the hills around the village but don’t have shrines dedicated only to themselves.

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<sup>323</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 196-97.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Furer-Haimendorf, “The Cult of the Clan God,” 158.

<sup>326</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 225-265.

The *anga dev*, the most powerful of all ancestors, represent the third and highest level of deification of ancestors and are distinguished by their worship beyond their home villages. There are several overlapping categories of *anga dev*. Some are connected to a family, like the Kesar Kunwar *anga dev* of the family of Anjori Nareti (a contemporary of Narharideo) of Makri. Others are recognized as founders of particular clans, like Patwan Dokra in Palewa of the Kunjam clan. They are often called Mahadeo. Still others claim territorial sway over groups of 12, 52 or 84 villages, or *dev pargana*, and are therefore also referred to as *pargana dev*.<sup>327</sup> *Anga dev* can sometimes have all three, or two, of these roles.

The *pargana dev*, the most important of all *anga dev* because of their territorial reach, need to be seen in the context of the raja's claim to territorial sovereignty. In his study of the territorial system of the Rajput kingdoms of medieval Chhattisgarh, C. U. Wills had identified a standard administrative system of territorial sub-division into 12, 18 and 84 villages/*pargana*, corresponding to Mughal or earlier administrative divisions, among them.<sup>328</sup> In Kanker, I did not come across remnants or memories of *zamindari* and/or *malguzari* corresponding to these units. *Zamindari* and territorially fixed *malguzari* are also not mentioned in the archival documents of the colonial-princely

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<sup>327</sup>For example, the Kongal Deo *anga dev* of Kongera presides over 12 villages: Vyas Kongera, Singarbhat, Mohpur, Patharri, Atur Gaon, Komalpur, Harvel, Regadhar, Kulgaon, Bewarti, Kodabhat and Daspur. The *siyan* at Kongera told me that the last three no longer considered themselves as part of the *barho*. Similarly, Patwan Dokra *anga dev* presides over a larger *pargana* of 48 villages: Palewa, Badatola, Bhainsakatta, Araud, Kotela, Kurubhat, Tahakapara, Harafa Charama, Rani Dongri, Kilepat, Geetpahar, Halba, Tikrapara, Navdobri, Bhanpuri, Sirigohan, Lilwapahar, Masulpani, Bahanapani, Shahwada, Kurna, Dodkawahi, Kohokatola, Bharripara, Charbhatti, Umaradah, Kishanpuri, Dumripani, Marrampani, Bansagar, Akhiharra, Risewada, Chawad, Chamar, Pandaripani, Dhekula, Junwani, Rampur, Kusumpani, Devi Nawagaon, Tahakapara, Jepra, Harradula, Bhiraud, Kariha, Pandaripani, Bhilai, Telgura, Patharri. The last of the villages, the 49<sup>th</sup> one in the list, was claimed as part of the Kongera *barho* also. The general term for such *anga dev* is *pargana* or *barho* (from *barah* meaning 12, standing for a group of 12 villages) *dev*.

<sup>328</sup> Wills, "The Territorial System of Rajput Kingdoms" in Medieval Chhattisgarh."

regime either. It appears that in Kanker it is in the context of the *anga dev* that the *pargana* territorial units are remembered.

I argue that the *dev pargana* (territory of an *anga dev*) represents a popular political-territorial organization centered on an *anga dev* community. From one point of view, the *dev pargana* could suggest an attempt by the raja's regime to convert pre-existing territorial units of the *anga dev* communities into a system of administrative-territorial control under itself given the common usage of the term *pargana* in administrative discourses. From another point of view, we could read the *dev pargana* as an assertion of popular, territorially distinct enclave of *anga dev* communities within and against the regime of the raja. The *pargana* level of *anga dev* practices thus embody and play out the relationship between the raja and the *anga dev* communities around questions of territorial control. Chhote and Bade Pat Deo, as the *anga dev* of the entire Kanker-*raj* (kingdom of Kanker), represent at once the raja's success in the territorial integration of Kanker as well as the localization of the raja's territorial pretensions into the system of *anga dev pargana*.

Elwin speculated that the word *anga* in the term *anga-dev* was the same as the Sanskrit-Hindi word *anga* meaning "body," and had "developed out of the cult of the dead and in particular from the custom of using the corpse carried on its bier as a means of divination."<sup>329</sup> Given that my Gond interlocutors, like Elwin's, were unsure of the meaning of the word, Elwin's explanation might be a reasonable one to work with. Most of the *anga dev* appear in the form of two parallel logs of wood joined in the middle by a cross-bar, the shape of a funerary bier on which the corpse of the deceased is carried. Though ancestral deities at all levels can move, except in cases when they are in the form

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<sup>329</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 194.

of huge rocks and therefore too heavy to lift, the *anga dev* have a unique mobility because they can “walk” when carried on the shoulders of their bearers. For this reason, they travel far and wide, attending events like *jatra* in other villages, participating in rituals of making/restoring the proper arrangements of gods and villages (*gaon banana/sudhaar*) and visiting the raja of Kanker.

There are however variations on this shape so that sometimes there is only one log of wood as in the case of Raja Babu *anga dev* of Salebhat or several, as in the case of Patwan Dokra *anga dev* of Palewa, which has six parallel logs crossed by two more logs representing the seven original Kunjam clan brothers, the wife of Patwan Dokra or his *lamsena* (sister/daughter’s husband who often attends on the *anga dev*). There are *anga dev*, like Thema Dokra of Thema, one of Patwan Dokra’s brothers, who take the form of an axes or spears. The log form of the *anga dev* is decorated with silver ornaments in the shape of sun or moon that are nailed to the flat ends of the logs, bands wrapped around the logs and small canopies. Sometimes, peacock feathers are tucked into the joints of the logs. The cross-bar in the middle, where the spirit is lodged, is mounted with snake or bird-like silver objects.

As indicated earlier, even though the *anga dev* are mostly recognized as male, in the case of clan founders, the female aspect also comes into view. There are instances when clan founders are recognized as *dokra* and *dokri* (old man and woman). The wives of many clan founders are called *Bomdin* or *Bamhanin dokri* (Brahmin *dokri*), pointing to lineages that cannot be clearly separated in the distinctions tribe-caste and tribal-Hindu. In Kanagon, there is a shrine for Bomdin Dokri, the wife of clan/tribe founder Lingo of Semurgaon in Bastar. Similarly, Thema *anga dev*’s wife Dhutmahin Dokri has a shrine

near Thema village at Anjani. Although I have not found a clan in Kanker that has only a female clan deity, Grigson mentions at least two among the Marias in Bastar, Oghul Muttai of the Dhuruwa clan, and Gumtuli of the Padali clan of Padalibhum at Adnar.<sup>330</sup>

The blurring, combining and merging of male and female ancestors seen in the village-level ancestral deities discussed earlier can be found at the level of the *anga dev* as well. It is possible for an *anga dev* to carry both the male and female aspects of the birth of the clan, though eventually it is the former that supersedes the latter. For example, Sone Kunwar *anga dev* is often spoken of as *devi*. As pointed out earlier, the form of Patwan Dokra of Palewa has a log representing his wife. While recognizing this blurring of genders, I will continue to refer to the *anga dev* as male because that is how the deity is mostly marked. Since gender identities and roles are fairly clearly marked among the *bhumkal*, this question requires a separate study.

An *anga dev*, or his body, is made when a powerful ancestor troubles a village by causing illness or other kinds of harm, appears in the dream of a person, usually a *siyan* or *gaita*, or makes some other sign like confronting the person as a tiger or leopard, and eventually manifests itself in the form of a small piece of iron or stone in the house. The person and village or group of people who are thus forced to acknowledge the ancestor then test (*jaanchna*) the authenticity of the ancestor and his powers by a variety of means. They may ask for a wish and see whether it is fulfilled. Or the ancestor may identify the arrangement of other gods in the village, known and unknown, to the satisfaction of everyone involved.

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Once the manifestation of the ancestor has been confirmed, an elaborate procedure consisting of many activities including the identification of the tree from which the log will be taken and the person who will hew the log is undertaken. The wood from which the *anga dev* is built is usually taken from *saja*, *ira* or *bel* trees which, due to their significance to the origin and health of the clan and village communities, are considered sacred. When he has taken shape, the *anga dev* is consecrated through ritual bathing, animal sacrifice and other kinds of worship. Before being installed in his shrine, the *anga dev* is asked to choose his *gaita* and is once again subjected to tests by other deities including other *anga dev*. I have discussed this phenomenon in the context of Sone Kunwar *anga dev* earlier.

The *anga dev* reside in their *roud* (shrine) that can be an impermanent, thatched, open structure, a *pucca* (permanent brick and cement) structure or a cave in a hill. The shrine is usually located in and is the focal point of a *dev-kothar*, discussed in the last chapter. The *anga dev* are usually surrounded by attendants in the form of metal and clay figurines, trumpets, metal chains, agricultural implements and poles with flags representing significant animals, trees and deities. The *anga dev*'s most regular and loyal attendant is his brother or son-in-law (who stays with the wife's family) as pointed out earlier.

Though deified, the *anga dev*, and for that matter all ancestral deities, retain their human qualities. The people often speak of taking care of or tending to (*posna*) their ancestors as if they were very old persons or infants unable to look after themselves. They also converse (*baat-cheet*) with their ancestral deities all the time in homely and informal ways, even scolding and abusing them once in a while. The *anga dev* can also

marry and have children and make familial relationships with other *anga dev* and gods, if they are not already related. At regular intervals, the *anga dev* change their clothes (*chola badalna*) when their bodies are oiled and polished, and new ornaments put on them.

This blurring of the divine-human divide points to the ways in which the people retain connections across and access to modes of being usually too easily separated by us through the distinction “divine” and “human.” The ancestors are not completely projected out into another superior realm where worship provides the only channel of communication but are kept tethered to the *bhumkal* in a manner in which the *bhumkal* continues to retain some power over them. From another point of view, it could be said that the *bhumkal* shares in the divinity of its ancestors. Not only are the realms of the divine and the human not clearly distinct, the divine is also domesticated so that power does not always flow in one direction. By projecting itself into its deified ancestors and vice-versa, and by retaining control over them, the *bhumkal* can be seen as asserting its own power and leverage on the world.

This can be seen clearly in the practice where if an *anga dev* is not effective, his body can be thrown away either into the river or a designated site attached to the village ossuary, and a new body built and re-installed. The case of the Nahars throwing Chhote and Bade Pat into the river in Darro’s account discussed in the introduction demonstrates this. The body of the *anga dev*, or the particular presence of an ancestral force, is thus in the final instance subordinated to the will of the *bhumkal*. Although it could be argued that only the body of the *anga dev* is open to rejection and discarding and not the spirit itself, it should be kept in mind that if the embodying of an ancestral spirit is the



acknowledgement of its powers, the throwing away of that body is recognition of that spirit's loss of power.

The entire complex of ancestral deities is central to the life of the Gonds, and in the case of the second level of ancestral deities and especially the *anga dev*, to the whole village and beyond. To return to Manohar Netam's exposition of Gond history, ancestral deities embody memories of the birth and continuance of the *bhumkal*. In their act of founding the first settlement, beginning cultivation and sustaining life over generations, the ancestral deities represent the collective, historical experience of the *bhumkal*. As in the past, their main task is to negotiate with and stabilize the forces of the *bhum* so that the *bhumkal* can make their life with minimal disruptions; and they do so under the watch of the *bhumkal*. Let me now discuss the non-ancestral deities and forces of the *bhum*, another critical set of entities in the *anga dev* cosmology, over who, through their ancestors, the *bhumkal* seek leverage.

### **Non-Ancestral Forces**

Not all the non-ancestral forces that derive from the *bhum*, and comprise another significant part of the cosmology of the villages of Kanker, are worshipped, but all have some kind of extra-ordinary power – either to cause harm or benefit, or sometimes both – over the fortunes of humankind. There is a vast and ever-growing world of deities and non-deified forces in the villages of Kanker and it is difficult to give a full account of it here. I will therefore restrict my discussion to the most important and common gods and non-godly forces.

Among the non-ancestral deities, various avatars of the mother-goddess, representing *bhum* itself, are the most prominent. Grigson attests to the worship of the

“Village Mother,” along with “Bhum” (Earth) and the *anga dev*, as the main deity complex of the Marias even in the early twentieth century.<sup>331</sup> He also argued that it was sometimes difficult to separate these deities. Similarly, Elwin writes about “Earth Mother,” “the ultimate source of power that manifests herself in all deities,”<sup>332</sup> along with the *anga dev*, as the chief gods of the Murias. In the villages of Kanker, I came across a host of goddesses who get conflated into the figure of a mother goddess, including Shitala (the goddess of pox), *gram-devi* (village goddess), Maoli (“mother” in Halbi) and *annkunwari* (goddess of food, from the word *ann* meaning food). The mother goddesses often get merged into *budhi dokri*, Parvati, Durga (a mother goddess figure popular in some regions of India) and even the *anga dev*.

These goddesses are responsible for all aspects of village life, from health and cultivation in general to the most specific of issues one can think of. The mother goddesses take a variety of forms in the Kanker villages. They appear as female figurines of stone and clay, the former sometimes of considerable antiquity and the latter newer and often as popular images of Durga. They can also take the form of stones and other objects we have seen in the case of the ancestral deities. They are either housed in temples of their own or in *dev-kothar* along with the *anga dev*, or kept on open platforms in the center of the villages.

The goddess Shitala (literally “the cool one”) is the most popular among them. Neither Grigson nor Elwin mention this deity in their study of Gond religion in Bastar. On the contrary, I found the cult of Shitala to be very strong in the villages of Kanker as

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<sup>331</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 195.

<sup>332</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 181.

well as in northern Bastar, and in both places of some antiquity. The shrine of Shitala in these areas date back at least to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Elwin argued that “Muria religion is undoubtedly a religion of the Hindu family with special affinities to its Shaivite interpretation, yet at the same time...little “Hinduized”.”<sup>333</sup> He was, like Grigson,<sup>334</sup> framing his discussion of Gond religion in terms of a Hindu/tribal binary.<sup>335</sup> It is possible that Shitala, marked within this binary as a “Hindu” goddess, was seen as a corruption of a purer “tribal” religion and hence not discussed by them.

The problem in attempting to understand Shitala through the distinction Hindu/tribal can be seen in the worship of Shitala in Chhattisgarh, and definitely in the villages of Kanker, where Hindu caste groups, both high and low in normative caste hierarchy, and tribal groups difficult to separate from caste groups except through self-justifying official classificatory practices, worship her. Shitala, most commonly known as the goddess of smallpox, is worshipped all across north India.<sup>336</sup> Smallpox goddesses are in fact worshipped in some form and name all over India.<sup>337</sup>

Mentioned in the *Skandapurana*, a text of the late Sanskritic tradition, as the goddesses of smallpox,<sup>338</sup> Shitala is worshipped in the villages of Kanker as the goddess who provides protection against all diseases, especially to children; and as the goddess of well-being and good fortune. She is not represented as she is in the text mentioned, riding

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>334</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 35-57.

<sup>335</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 174-224.

<sup>336</sup> Susan Wadley, “Sitala: The Cool One,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, No. 1 (1980): 33.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> “History of the Goddess of Small-Pox,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, No. 1004(1880): 490.

on an ass, with a broom and a jug in her hands, her head adorned with a winnowing basket,<sup>339</sup> but takes the form of a large conical stone, her body adorned with a permanent coat of vermillion, the top of which is marked with two silver eyes. The smallest of villages and *para* (neighborhoods) have a shrine of Shitala, which might sometimes be no more than a small clearing in the forest marked with a set of stones.

In the town of Kanker, where the cult of Shitala takes an elaborate form, she is worshipped as seven sisters, a tradition also found in Shitala worship in other parts of India where Shitala is one of seven sisters dealing with various types of poxes.<sup>340</sup> So in the town of Kanker there are seven temples to her, the most significant of which is devoted to Bade Shitala (eldest Shitala). This temple was built by Narharideo in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and is also the residence of Bade Pat Anga Dev, the elder of the two brothers *anga dev* kept by the raja of Kanker. Though she is a powerful deity, Shitala's powers are closely tied to that of the *anga dev* and the raja, as is evident in the Bade Shitala-Bade Pat-raja arrangement. Her powers are shored up as well as kept in check by other forces like the raja and the *anga dev* in the same way as she controls these forces attending on or related to her.

A mother goddess who is unique to southern Chhattisgarh is Danteshwari. Since Danteshwari seems to have a distinctly royal association, her worship in the villages provides us an opportunity to explore the entanglements of Gond cosmic and royal regimes and the play of power between them. In Bastar, where Danteshwari has a much wider, stronger and in many cases central presence, her pre-eminence has been attributed

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Wadley, "Sitala."

to her position as the *kul-devi* (family or lineage deity) of the Kakatiya rajas of Bastar.<sup>341</sup> According to popular accounts discussed by Valyani and Sahasi, when the first Kakatiya raja Annam Deo (1313-1358)<sup>342</sup> was fleeing Warrangal after his kingdom was captured by Muslim invaders, Danteshwari accompanied him. Wanting to assist the raja in finding a new kingdom, Danteshwari asked him to walk ahead of her. At what is today the town of Dantewada, the sound of her anklets got muffled by the sand on the bed of the streams Sankini and Dankini. When the raja looked back to check if the goddess was still following him, she stopped. This was the sign that the land they were in was to be his kingdom, and the raja built her main shrine at that place. While Sundar argues that the worship of Danteshwari in Bastar gained as a result of her association with the raja, and became the center of the most important royalist ritual of Dasehra in Bastar, she also notes that this royalist pre-eminence of Danteshwari might have derived from the popularity of local mother goddess worship.<sup>343</sup>

In Kanker too, Danteshwari is the lineage deity of the royal family but she does not seem to carry the same significance as a deity that, despite affinities with local mother goddesses, allowed the integration of the subject population through a central ritual or tradition. Her connection with the royal family can be traced back to the time of the Kandra dynasty of Bansla of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (1345-85), the same time as the flight of Annam Deo to Bastar.<sup>344</sup> Danteshwari is important in the villages of Kanker only as one among several mother goddess figures.

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<sup>341</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 61-64.

<sup>342</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 29.

<sup>343</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 61-64.

<sup>344</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 27.

I found temples of Danteshwari at Kurna in association with Maoli and at Bar-Devi at the Shiv temple where Bar Deo *anga dev* also resides: at both sites she is a subsidiary deity. At Charbhata there is a temple devoted to her, but this may have to do with the fact that the raja of Kanker had a large concentration of his own lands here (*khalsa*, in opposition to other lands over which people had *patta* rights). Two other places where Danteshwari has her own temple, in the town of Kanker and at Bansla, were both capitals of the rajas of Kanker. While at Bansla, the cult of Danteshwari overshadows that of other deities and her temple is the most important locally, at Kanker, her temple is today a private place of worship of the former royal family.

If we acknowledge her as primarily the raja's deity, Danteshwari's secondary status within the Gond pantheon demonstrates the limited success, unlike Bastar, of the raja's regime in forcing its own deity into the deity practices of the people. If we see her as a variant of the mother goddess that the raja elevated as his family goddess for purposes of legitimation, in Kanker she seems not to have provided the focus necessary to closely tie the people to the raja like in Bastar. In any case, Danteshwari represents the imbrications of village and royal cosmologies and therefore their regimes of power.

There is a category of female forces that impinge greatly on the life of the Kanker villages, the *kaina*. They are propitiated but not worshipped. The term *kaina* is derived from *kanya* in Hindi meaning "little girl." The *kaina* can be of various kinds: *jal-kaina* (water-*kaina*), *thal kaina* (land-*kaina*), *van-kaina* (forest-*kaina*), *bijli-kaina* (lightening-*kaina*), etc. They are present, as their names indicate, in water, land, forest and other natural phenomena and represent the force that these elements bring to bear on the life of the people.

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Their force can be experienced through harm as well as benefit and therefore they need to be continuously propitiated. They also have a mischievous, sexual aspect to them, especially when bachelors and their interaction with water bodies are concerned. There are many stories about young men who got pulled into the stream or got lost in the forest because the *kaina* trapped them. There are no permanent forms in which they are propitiated: they can take the form of trees, fish and wild beasts when they appear distinctly apart from their general locations in streams and ponds, village fields and forests. At one level, they are aspects of *bhum* or *gram-devi* and represent the various forces of the entire landscape in which people go about their lives. Various trees, like *saja*, and wild beats, especially the tiger (*bagh*), often recognized and propitiated separately, form part of the same complex of forces as the *kaina*.

There are also forces that clearly cause harm, are feared and have to be dealt with from time to time. The *matia*, who operates with stealth at night, is a dwarf who poaches on the granary. Then there are *paret* and *paretin* (from the Hindi *prêt* and *pretin*, meaning male and female spirits) who have not been pacified, *tonha-tonhi* (witches-wizards), *raksa* (probably from the Hindi term *rakshas*, arguably translated as demon) and *mashan* (from the Hindi *smashan* meaning graveyard) that hover around and catch people to cause them harm. Dinesh Verma, a school teacher in the Charama *tehsil*, and also a member of the Archaeological Committee of the Kanker District, in which capacity he is an indefatigable collector of local lore and artifacts, described these forces as *bairasu dev* or forces that are the enemies of the people, the word *bair* meaning enmity.<sup>345</sup>

These non-ancestral forces are those that, as we have seen in Netam's history, the ancestors negotiated with to stabilize the conditions for settlement and cultivation.

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<sup>345</sup> Conversation with Dinesh Verma, 06.12.12, Charama.

Though the *bhumkal* propitiates these forces all the time, they depend more on the propitiation of the ancestors to continue to maintain the balance of the world by intervening on their behalf in relation to the non-ancestral forces. Given how the *bhumkal* relates to its ancestors, we see a regime where no category of forces has pre-eminence beyond questioning. We should now turn to the *bhumkal*, the people of the *bhum*, and explore the various relations of power through which they are organized and engage with the forces of the *bhum* discussed so far.

### **The *Bhumkal* and other Notions of Community**

The term *bhumkal* is most commonly used in the case of and related to the *anga dev* cosmology, in keeping with the discourse of the *bhum*, to describe the community that takes shape in the context of its practices. Given the significance of the *anga dev* among the village communities of Kanker, it would not be wrong to say that the *anga dev* cosmology and practices constitute the basis of the traditional village community, or that the traditional village community is centered on the *anga dev* cosmology and practices. The term *bhumkal* is used at the level of clan/sept, village, *pargana* and the entire area of princely Kanker. When *anga dev* networks stretch into Bastar in the south and the Chhattisgarh plains proper in the north, the concept of *bhumkal* exceeds the territorial limits of princely Kanker.

*Bhumkal* literally means “people of the land or *bhum*.” When used for the village, *pargana* and Kanker, the term *bhumkal* does not have a clan or tribe-specific meaning. Even at the level of the clan there are very few *anga dev* practices that do not include members beyond the narrow confines of the clan communities. There is however a general tendency in dominant discourses to identify the *bhumkal* with “tribal”



communities and to construct these communities as purely “tribal.” The corollary of this belief is that non-tribal caste communities similarly get constructed as communities confined only to their particular caste groups.

Grigson pointed to the widespread currency of the term *koi* or *koitor* meaning “people” and/or “community” in Gondi among the Gonds of Bastar to describe themselves in opposition to “Hindu” people.<sup>346</sup> However, Grigson and Elwin also noted that even in Bastar, where the Gonds constitute a greater proportion of the population than in Kanker, it was difficult to separate out a village community limited only to one clan or tribe, or in terms of the caste/tribe distinction, at least as far back as the early decades of the last century.<sup>347</sup> The villages of Kanker, though having a Gond majority, contain a substantial population of those designated as members of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in administrative classification. While 56% of the population of the Kanker district (which includes the northern most tracts of the former Bastar state, Antagarh and Pakhanjur) is that of STs, the overwhelming majority of the “General” population of 40% comprises those of OBCs.<sup>348</sup>

In the villages of Kanker, I found the range of the proportion of Gond households to the rest varying from 10% in the north (for example in Girhola), towards the plains of Chhattisgarh, to 90% in the south (in Thema), towards the Bastar hills. The most commonly found OBCs (with the supposed traditional occupations mentioned in

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<sup>346</sup> Grigson, *Maria Gonds*, 35-36. Here I need to mark that it is possible to have conceptions of Gond identity as distinct from a “Hindu” one even when there is no clear sociological separation of the two. Later in this chapter I discuss precisely this phenomenon. However, it is also important to problematize the neat separation of “Gonds” and “Hindus” through reified categories of communities.

<sup>347</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 35-57; Elwin, *The Murias*, 10-14.

<sup>348</sup> *Annual Plan 2012-13, Backward Regions Grant Fund, Kanker District of Chhattisgarh*, [kanker.gov.in/zp/scheme/brgf.pdf](http://kanker.gov.in/zp/scheme/brgf.pdf) (accessed August 30, 2012).

parenthesis) are Raut (cattle-herders), Mahar (vegetable-farmers), Kalar (liquor-brewers), Teli (oil-pressers), Kewat (boat-rowers), Dhimar (fisher-folk), Nai (hair-dressers) and Lohar (iron-smiths). There is a small population of Scheduled Castes (SCs) (4% of the district population),<sup>349</sup> the most numerous of whom are the Satnamis, belonging to a reformist sect of the Chhattisgarh plains, and a scattering of related castes like the Nahars (bamboo-growers) and Gadas (drummers) whose position in the official classification tribe/caste is uncertain.

The villages of Kanker have a mixed tribe-caste population that is difficult to divide into two separate communities in the context of the *anga dev* cosmology and practices. In an article titled “Demographic aspects of the Gonds, 1961-71” (1979), drawing from the large body of ethnographic literature on the Gonds, Nirmal Chandra Das described the Gonds, whom he called a “tribe in the full sense of the term,” as a “social group with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity, unifying social organization, linked through consanguineous and affinal ties, generally having a leader, a common ancestor and common patron deity.”<sup>350</sup> The Gonds of Kanker, despite clan organization, appear in no clear distinction from the castes they live together with in any other aspect outlined by Das and by most others who have written about them. The Gonds of the Kanker villages do not seem to be different in terms of physiognomy and language from and share their cultural practices with those classified in distinction to them as caste peoples.

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Nirmal Chandra Das, “Demographic Aspects of the Gonds, 1961-71,” *Man in India* LIX, No. 3 (1979): 218.

Prakash Bhandari, the 35-year old *gaita* of Garhiya Pahar, gave me a description of society in which he said that while the *bhumkal* was one, its people followed 7 different occupations (*jat* or caste): the Nai dressed hair, the Dhobi washed clothes, the Teli pressed oil, the Kumhar made pots, the Sonar-Lohar worked with metal, the Gada entertained and the Gond-Halba cultivated.<sup>351</sup> In this conception, tribal and caste peoples form one society, and despite occupational differentiation, there seems to be no sense of hierarchy among them akin to that of caste-based societies.

Studying tribe- tribe and tribe-caste relations in the Gond-Bhunja-Kamar area of the Chhattisgarh plains, S. C. Dubey had argued that in the mixed tribe-caste villages where the Gonds were in a majority, the non-Gond populations had “accepted the superiority of Gonds in some narrow and limited spheres of life.”<sup>352</sup> In the case of Kanker the non-Gond population is an integral part of the *anga dev* cosmos but without necessarily being in an inferior position within it. Unlike in many other Gond majority areas where the Gonds are the main landholders and exercise authority on lower caste populations,<sup>353</sup> and exist in a *jajmani* (patron-client) relation to the latter who provide village services, in Kanker, “tribal” and caste people both own land and provide reciprocal services to each other. There are no eating taboos in this collection of peoples.

The position of those officially classified as SCs within the *anga dev* system is no different from that of those marked as STs and OBCs, and these official distinctions do not seem to apply for any purpose of hierarchization within the *anga dev* practices. The

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<sup>351</sup> Conversation with Prakash Bhandari, 05.19.12, Kanker.

<sup>352</sup> S. C. Dubey, “Inter-Tribal Relations: A Study,” *Man in India* XXX, No. 1 (1950): 73.

<sup>353</sup> S. C. Sinha, Jyoti Sen and Sudhir Panchbhair, “The Concept of Diku among the Tribes of Chhotanagpur,” *Man in India*, XLIX, No. 2, 1969, 121-138.

Gada people, who have traditionally specialized in drumming for the *anga dev* ceremonies, call themselves in relation to official classification as *adivasi-harijan*, the former being another term for “tribal,” and the latter for the SCs, and are listed arbitrarily either under STs or SCs. Whereas this places them within a historically determined understanding of social hierarchy, within the *anga dev* practices, they seem to be on par with the other groups and even claim a special role in ritual function.

45-year old Prem Lal Kurram, a Gada drummer, told me in a conversation in June last year that the raja, impressed by the musical abilities of the Gada people, had given them the charge of Ankuri Mata (the goddess of the ripening grain), an important mother goddess related to cultivation.<sup>354</sup> From that time on, he said, the Gadas have had a very important role in the *anga dev* practices. Likening society to a body, Kurram described the Gadas as its hands.

Though this account suggests the raja’s hand in the arrangements of the *anga dev* society through strategic intervention concerning the status of particular social groups, there are very few groups (Gada and Halba) of this kind. Further, these groups do not occupy a hierarchically superior position in the *anga dev* practices and can be put on par with the various Gond clans and village caste groups who claim particular associations with the *anga dev*. Yet the fact that Gadas are drummers in the *anga dev* practices all over Kanker means that the raja did sometimes manage to impact the *anga dev* society. Such interventions however seem to have been limited. The main point to be kept in mind here, as pointed out earlier, is the difficulty of clearly separating tribes from castes, and middling castes from lower castes.

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<sup>354</sup> Conversation with Prem Lal Kurram, 06.05.12, Kanker.

Yet there are sociological distinctions that do sometimes separate the Gonds from the rest of the village even if the mixed community of village eventually subsumes this distinction. The Gonds often organize as phratries, clans and septs, especially around the worship of their clan-founder. The cult of ancestors is based in this organization even if, as we have seen, especially at the level of the *anga dev*, it has a much wider appeal. Clans belonging to one phratry consider each other *bhai* (brother) and do not marry amongst themselves. They marry in other phratries that they consider their *samdhan* (relations by marriage). The most extensive *bhai-samdhan* system that I came across in Kanker was as follows: Bhai group 1: Hidco, Kawachi, Bade Madkam, Parchami, Jurri, Kumeti, Usendi, Salam, Tumreti, Khichami, Matlam, Sori, Kadiyam, Kodopi, Thappa, Kachlam, Kurram, Katlam, Netam; Bhai group 2: Marai/Mandavi, Dugga, Kange, Nareti, Dhuruwa, Kaudo, Poya, Hurra, Potai, Darro, Kolla, Gota, Goti, Koreti, Kunjam. The *bhai* and *samdhan* phratries strengthen their relationship by giving each other ritually significant roles in the worship of clan founders. Through particular roles in feasts, of cooking, first-eating, etc., a complex set of affinal ties between clans and phratries is articulated.

Divisions often surface within clans or phratries in the context of the dispersal of families over large areas over the possession of the clan-founding *anga dev*. We have seen in the first chapter how the Marai Gonds of Bedma (in Bastar) and Bhawgir-Nawagaon were locked in a tussle over the control of Sone Kunwar *anga dev*. In Murdongri there was a court case in which the Dehari Gonds of Murdongri and Dhanora (in Bastar) fought a long and hard legal battle for the possession of Khada Dokra *anga dev*.<sup>355</sup> Often when one or the other side eventually gains possession of the *anga dev*, the

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<sup>355</sup> Conversation with Malo Mandavi, 05.06.12, Murdongri.

losing side retrieves the spirit of the *anga dev* anew and makes a new body for him. The case of Chhote Pat is somewhat different. The Deharis of Bansla who want Chhote Pat returned to them do not claim to be from the clan of Chhote Pat but are only the original *gaita* appointed by the Nahar raja in Bansla. Yet, the Bansla issue is similar to the other two in that the *anga dev* in all three cases are recognized as *pargana dev* and hence belong to a much larger *bhumkal* and not just a clan.

The various castes in the village are endogamous. Yet, given the small numbers of each caste, I did not come across any caste-based formations in the village or higher *anga dev* platforms. The PVKM, the OBCs' initiative that Bhagtu is part of, seems to be active at the level of the district and is finding it difficult to set up cells at the block and village levels. Traditional caste based affiliations and *panchayats* are weak among the village castes of Kanker if they are present at all.

For example, the Nai caste of Kanker identify themselves as Shriwas and Chandapar, the first being lineages of local derivation and the second, as the name indicates, lineages that came come from beyond Chanda in central India to the west of Kanker.<sup>356</sup> Yet there are no strong ties between the families within and between each group as they lie scattered and in small numbers all over Kanker. Once every three or four years, itinerant *bhatt* (learned men), or traditional Nai genealogists, come wandering into Kanker and go from one Nai family to another, revising their genealogical documents and collecting a small fee as livelihood. Beyond such week associational practices, the Nai, and other caste groups, do not appear to be organized in any significant way.

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<sup>356</sup> Conversation with Jaipal, 05.02.12, Kanker.

The word *bhumkal* is sometimes used generically to denote community by tribal or *adivasi* organizations of recent provenance although they prefer the term *samaj* or community in Chhattisgarhi-Hindi, using *bhumkal* mostly in their association with the *anga dev* practices. In Kurutola, a national (or international) tribal organization, the *Shri Majhi Antar-rashtriya Samajwad Kisan Sainik* (SMASKS) (The International Socialist Peasant Soldiers of the Honorable Majhi), engages in clan-level *anga dev* practice of the Kange sub-group of the Gonds (I discuss this case in the conclusion). This organization begins with the notion of the *anga dev bhumkal* and projects it outwards to embrace all Gonds, or even all tribal peoples. In Gada Gauri, the *dev-majhi* (head of deity complex) of 12 villages is also the head of the block organization of the Gondwana Samaj, an organization devoted to the rights of the Gond tribe as a whole. Since he uses the organizational apparatuses of the two bodies he is the head of – the *anga dev bhumkal* and the larger Gond community – for each other, the *bhumkal* often takes on the connotations of tribal identity.

The relationship of these tribal organizations to *anga dev* cosmology and practices is complex because they are organized with reference to the state-centered frameworks of present-day political and governmental discourses of identity and development. The clan-based and mixed tribe-caste nature of the *anga dev* practices lends itself only awkwardly to associations that are framed along pan-Gond or pan-*adivasi* lines. Except when it is used in the context of tribal mobilizations, the *bhumkal* in the context of the *anga dev* practices, whether at the level of the village, *pargana* or the entire former territory of the princely state of Kanker or beyond, is a capacious concept. It can refer to all the people attached to the *anga dev* cosmology without making a distinction between “tribe” and

“Hindu”/”caste” and at the same time recognizing intra-*bhumkal* clans where the castes are equivalent to clans. Tribal and caste-based organizations do however create alignments among the *bhumkal* that work through other, non-*anga dev*, notions of community. These alignments, unlike in the case of the clan-base *anga dev* practices, do not get subsumed within the *anga dev bhumkal* and posit affiliations that cannot be dealt with within the framework of the *anga dev* practices.

In recent years, especially since 2003, during which the right-wing political party *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP) has been in government in Chhattisgarh, politico-cultural mobilization around the idea of a separate “tribal” identity has been on the rise among the Gonds of Kanker. While some of this has to do with the latest wave of growing assertions of tribal or *adivasi* identity in general in the country from the 1990s onwards, and in the state of Chhattisgarh and especially in Bastar since 2000, the immediate, local imperative for them has often been created by Hindu right-wing campaigns to “hinduize” “tribal” peoples.<sup>357</sup>

An important result of such campaigns has been the gradual change in the traditional heterodox *navaratra* celebrations in the villages leading to conflicts around Hindu/tribal distinctions. The *navaratra*, a nine-day religious festival held twice a year, was a relatively modest, locally-oriented and heterodox affair in the villages before. Cadres of the BJP and the Congress Party, who consider the *navaratra* to be a “Hindu” festival, have since aggressively promoted a new, heavily mainstream Hindu version of

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<sup>357</sup> In the last decade, the BJP’s parent organization, the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS), has launched the *Ghar Wapasi* (Return Home) campaign against missionaries to “reconvert” Christian tribal peoples to “Hinduism” in Chhattisgarh. See John Dayal, “RSS sets up “Defence Army” : prepares village cadres for conversion of tribals into Hinduism,” *Milli Gazette*, May 26, 2004. Even though missionary presence in Kanker is negligible, this campaign has had an impact in terms of encouraging BJP and RSS cadres to carry out activities of “Hinduization” among tribal peoples in general. There are no serious scholarly studies of this phenomenon yet.



it. Where organizations devoted to “tribal” identity are already, if weakly, present, this has provided occasion for counter assertions that seek to purge local culture of “Hindu” elements.

This is clearly seen in Gada Gauri where, during the *navaratra*, there have been two celebrations for the last 5 years. At the *dev-kothar* of Raj Kunwar *anga dev* they celebrate in the local way while at the shrine of Raj Kunwar *anga dev*’s father Hoche Dokra, a more “Hindu” festival is organized. While the people of the village are split between the two along no particular line, polarization is increasing around questions of what is “tribal” and what is “Hindu.” At Bhanupratap-pur and Bhawgir-Nawagaon there has been tension over long-standing animal sacrifice and meat-eating rituals in the *anga dev* practices where “Hindu” groups are now construing meat-eating as polluting.

In response to these “Hindu” campaigns, there has been a steady increase in and greater consolidation of initiatives centered on the need to assert as well as protect “tribal” identity. At Makri Khuna earlier this year, I came across members of an association called *Adivasi Yuva Prabhag* (AYP) (Adivasi Youth Department), connected to SMASKS, which has been working in the north-east areas of Kanker for the last eight years in order to preserve *adivasi sanskriti aur parampara* (*adivasi* culture and tradition). The members of this organization are young men and women who wear white clothes and *pagdi* (turban), engage in community welfare work and hold village, block and district level meetings to inform their audience of “true *adivasi* culture,” in which the knowledge of *adivasi* gods has pre-eminence. Members of the AYP were keen to solicit my support, as raja, for their project. The AYP is however often led to draw sharp distinctions between “Hindu” and “tribal.”

The most divisive issue among the *bhumkal* has been the marking out of the deities and of deity practices themselves as “Hindu” and “tribal.” We have seen how deities that dominant discourses would identify as “Sanskritic,” in the conflation of clan founders as Mahadeo and Parvati and the worship of Durga, Ram-Janaki, etc., form an integral part of the *anga dev* cosmology without a recognition of this distinction. The various assertions of this distinction in “Hindu” and “tribal” campaigns and counter-campaigns has led to a division that has, as in Makri-Singrai and other places, affected the proper conduct of deity practices. The notion of the community of the *bhumkal* thus sometimes exists in a tense relationship with other notions of the community. The continuing centrality and significance of the *anga dev* practices has meant however that the mixed tribe and caste *bhumkal* remains the most powerful notion of community in the villages of Kanker.

In the *baithak* I interacted with people within the mixed Gond and caste village society who appear to be on the boundaries of the *anga dev* community. These are middle aged and young men who have to temporarily leave the village to work in transferable jobs in semi-urban and urban centers in the middle and lower levels of the government bureaucracy in Kanker and other parts of Chhattisgarh. Traveling out and living in cities for employment, they seem to experience a degree of alienation from local culture. To some extent, the discourse of tribal identity seems to have countered this alienation, even though the conception of cultural heritage from this perspective tends to be narrower than that of the *anga dev bhumkal*.

Such “migrants” were often eager to talk to me, tell me about their “modern” outlook and often seek my intervention for job transfers and other career related issues.

They were less involved in the traditions of the village but often keen to listen to what the older *siyan* had to say about them. The older *siyan* on their part lamented the lack of “culture and tradition” among this group but felt happy that some of that lack was being recognized and remedied. In Tarasgaon, a village of Sori and Poya clans of the Gonds, from where a large number of young men have joined the middle and lower bureaucracy (for which reason the village has one of the largest concentration of *pucca* houses), there exists a telling situation where after a period of almost ignoring or rejecting local culture, the young have started training in local music and rituals associated with the *anga dev*.

I came across another powerful example of the dilemmas faced by this group of young men. Prakash Bhandari, the *gaita* of the Garhiya Pahar, is a young man of 35, and an electrical engineer with the State Electricity Board. He inherited his position as *gaita* from his father, much respected in the Kanker *bhumkal*, who passed away two years back. Although Bhandari has filled his father’s position quite admirably, he confided in me in a conversation in May last year about the tensions he experienced between his chosen and inherited callings.

Modern education, of which there is a continuous and a comparatively richer history in Kanker in comparison to Bastar and even other parts of Chhattisgarh since the late colonial period,<sup>358</sup> in itself does not seem to have caused a disconnection with or even questioning of the *anga dev* practices. The average literacy rate in Kanker in 2011

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<sup>358</sup> In 1942-43, a comment on the annual administrative report noted that though the population of Kanker was a fourth that of Bastar, there were 29 primary schools in Kanker as compared to 36 in Bastar. It further noted that 14% of the income of the Kanker State was devoted to education. *ESA, MC*, Sub-file, F-506, R.9-39/43, Letter from Resident, Chhattisgarh States, to Secretary, Crown Representative, Comment on Annual Administrative Report of Kanker State, 1942-43, 1944.

was about 71%, and among males 81%, slightly lower than what it had been in 2001.<sup>359</sup> The literate and well-educated participate in the *anga dev jatra* as eagerly as the others. This includes school teachers who, apart from being members of the *baithak*, are also *gaita*, *sirha* and *bhagat*. In many instances, *siyan* who were school teachers came forward particularly forcefully to give me accounts of the past.

The *bhumkal* is however not a society of equals but is hierarchical; and the relations of power that constitute it are determined by as well as determine the ways in which it engages with the forces of the *bhum*. Following is a discussion of the hierarchies and relations of power that comprise the *bhumkal*.

### **Hierarchies of the *Bhumkal***

The hierarchies of the *bhumkal* are closely related to the roles that various actors have in the *anga dev* practices. At first glance, in the *anga dev* practices, the *gaita* and *sirha*, who serve as intercessors with the ancestral gods, seem to have a clearly superior position. On closer look, their position is balanced in various ways and they share their powers with the village headman and the elders. The term *gaita* is of Gondi-Halbi extraction: the Hindi word *pujari* (priest) or the Gondi-Halbi word *dhuruwa* (not to be confused with the name of a tribe in southern Chhattisgarh) in Kanker are sometimes substituted for it. The *gaita* are persons who look after the *anga dev*, takes care of their needs, performs the proper rituals for various occasions and interpret the word of the deities.

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<sup>359</sup> *Census of India 2011, Kanker District Profile*, [http://censusindia.gov.in/Dist\\_File/datasheet-2214.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Dist_File/datasheet-2214.pdf) (accessed January 19, 2013).

The *gaita*'s life is one of perpetual worship that often requires considerable hardship. The *gaita* always appear fixated on the *anga dev*. The constant presence of the *gaita* with the deity creates a bond between them that is difficult to express. I spoke to Sakha Ram Patel, the septuagenarian *gaita* of Chhote Pat, early last year about his relationship with his charge. He spoke of Chhote Pat as if he was a son, friend, companion and god all rolled into one. Since he has been keeping ill these days, I asked him how he still manages to deal with the scores of people who visit Chhote Pat every day and with Chhote Pat's visit to the villages. Sakha Ram replied: "I don't know how I still do it (manage the affairs of Chhote Pat). Most of the time Dai Baba<sup>360</sup> (Chhote Pat) tells me what to do and how to do it. What love it is between us I don't know but Dai Baba is satisfied. I don't know how I will leave this to my children" (*Mein ni jano ela kaise karhoon. Jada tar Dai Babahich batathe mola ka karna hai aur kaise karma hai. Hamar beech ka maya hai mein ni jano par Dai Baba khush hai. Mein ni jano mein ola apan bachha man la kaise sonphoon*).<sup>361</sup>

While the position of the *gaita* is usually hereditary, there are many exceptions. Sakha Ram, for example, was the first in his family to be a *gaita*. The hereditary position of the *gaita* can be traced back to and is strong when the *anga dev* are also clan or village founders. Like we saw in the case of Manohar Netam, in his village Masulpani, the *gaita* of the village *anga-dev* was his uncle, a member of the *bhumihar* family. It is possible therefore that at the beginning, the founder of the village became both the headman and the *gaita*.

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<sup>360</sup> "Dai Baba" is another term used for Chhote Pat, "Dai" meaning "mother" and "Baba" meaning "child."

<sup>361</sup> Conversation with Sakha Ram Patel, 06.13.12, Kanker.

Writing of the Marias, Grigson believed that in the colonial period, the increasing interference of the Bastar State officials in the matters of the village forced the village communities to set up a dummy “secular” headman who would bear the brunt of state demands and insulate the real headman of the village, the *gaita*, who could therefore carry on the main tasks of the village, which were “religious,” without obstacles.<sup>362</sup> Of course, as pointed out in chapter three, Grigson did not attribute any political valence to this resistance. But what in fact Grigson had inadvertently pointed to was the difficulty of separating the “secular” from the “religious.” From the little information of this kind for Kanker, discussed in chapter three, it would not be wrong to argue that the administrative policies of the Kanker princely government might also have been effecting a separation of this kind when in fact it was not possible to do so. In any case, these days, the village headman and the *gaita* are usually two different persons even though they might be from the same founding family or clan.

Though the *gaita* is the most valued propitiator and interpreter of the *anga dev*, his powers are subject to several limitations. Even when the position is inherited, a *gaita* has to submit to a test by the *anga dev* and other deities. The *gaita* also has no monopoly over worship or interpretation. We have seen how every Gond household has its own ancestral deities. Every Gond person considers himself attached to his ancestors and talks to them regularly. There is no fixed ritual of elaborate or intricate character but only a generally known, loose repertory of practices from which one can choose according to suitability and convenience of the rituals to be performed so that what can be done by the *gaita* can be done by others as well.

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<sup>362</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 285.

There is a large category of people who are recognized as *sirha* or *bhagat* who specialize in inviting the deity to possess them. The term *sirha* refers to the person who can invite and hold the deity in his head or “*sir*,” and describes the condition of being possessed or mounted by the deity. The term *bhagat* means “devotee” and applies to a larger group of people who might not be *sirha* but associate with the *gaita* in looking after the *anga dev*. The *anga dev* are usually carried during important ceremonies by the *bhagat*. However, like in the case of the *gaita*, anyone who is keen can invite possession and carry the *anga dev*. Young boys and girls, not associated with the deity in any ritual function, are known to perform these tasks too.

Further, neither in the case of the *gaita* nor that of the *sirha* or *bhagat* is the act of divination mysterious and performed in secret. The ritual of divining with a heap of grains, or reading the motions of the *anga dev*, are well known, and the results are discussed openly and exhaustively by the *baithak*. If some *gaita* and *sirha* become famous as intercessors it is because the act of possession is deeply exhausting and not many can bear the strain that comes with it. Despite the fact that the *gaita*’s position is not so exclusive, as the keeper of the *anga dev*, he is a very important person in the *bhumkal*. The *gaita* or *pujari* of the other deities hold their own place but usually defer to the *anga dev gaita* during a gathering of deities.

The beginnings of the position of the *gaita*, the power he wields and the checks he is subjected to, were demonstrated in the following account given to me by Makhan Matiara early this year.<sup>363</sup> Matiara, an 85 year old man, is a member of one of the *malguzari* (revenue-collector) families in Thelkabod, a small village on the outskirts of the Kanker town. Matiara is from the Dhimar caste of fisher-folk who settled down in

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<sup>363</sup> Conversation with Makhan Matiara, 06.09.12, Thelkabod.

Thelkabod in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Thelkabod was a large marsh inhabited by people of the Salam clan of the Gonds, and the Kumhars and Patel castes, the Salam being the founding clan. The Dhimars gradually cleared the marsh and created large, open and clear ponds where they could fish. Matiara's grandfather Ujjar rose to be a *jamadar* (overseer of cultivation) with raja Komal Deo and eventually bought the *malguzari* for Thelkabod. One of his duties as a *malguzar* was to associate with the *siyan* of the village in looking after the *dev-bandobast* (arrangement of gods) of the village that centered on the propitiation of the deities *thakur dai*, Maoli and Shitala.

The position of the *gaita* of these deities has been in the hands of a Salam family. Long ago, probably at the time of the first settling of Thelkabod, a Salam *bhumihar* was returning home from the forest in the evening. As he crossed into the area of the village, he was stopped by a poor woman who asked him for water and shelter. Salam, taking pity on her, asked her to accompany him to his house. When Salam reached his house he found that the woman had disappeared. Later at night, the woman returned to him in his dream, revealed herself to be Shitala/Maoli and asked that he worship her for the good of the village. Since the time of that ancestor, his family, as *gaita*, has been performing the rituals of propitiation for the deities of the village.

In the time of Matiara's father Jethu Ram, the Salam *gaita* turned hostile to the village. Jethu Ram once saw the *gaita* standing on the edge of the forest, calling out to someone in the dead of the night. He saw this repeated several nights. After a week, *Rahu* (in Hindu astrology, a destructive cosmic element) descended on the village and people and cattle started dying in large numbers. Worried by this and sensing something amiss in the conduct of the *gaita*, Jethu Ram called Salam and warned him to desist from



befriending any harmful force. From what he had seen, Jethu Ram suspected that Salam was transacting with forces that had caused harm to the village.

Following this warning the *gaita* and his family fled the village and settled in Chivranj across the forest. The deaths stopped after his flight. While the worship of the village deities continued without the Salam *gaita*, the life of Thelkabod subsequently was never free from some problem or the other. Matiara lamented: “there were lots of obstacles and the business of gods and the arrangement of the entire village became fragile” (*bahut adchan aayis aur devi-devta ke karobaar aur poori basti ke vyavastha charama gaye rihis*). In his own time, Matiara came to believe that it was only the return of the Salam *gaita*’s family that would rectify the situation. Bisambar Salam, the present *gaita*, who is from the old Salam *gaita* family, was traced to Chivranj, and agreed to return to the village to perform ritual functions during festivals and other important events.

The *gaita* exercises his role or access to the ancestral forces together with others at the top of the village hierarchy so that no one person has pre-eminence. The gathering of deities at the level of the village and beyond are usually organized and managed by the *majhi* or *patel* (village headman). The title of *patel* for the village headman is distinct from that of the Patel caste that Bhagtu belongs to. There are *majhi/patel* at the level of the villages and they usually belong to and represent the founding families. When the *anga dev* of their village or clan is also a *pargana dev*, they automatically acquire the position of *pargana dev majhi/patel*. The *gaita* is constantly supervised by the *majhi/patel* while conducting worship.

From Grigson and Elwin we know that historically the *majhi*, as the village or *pargana* headman is called, had an important role in Bastar, especially when he was also the *gaita*, which was usually the case.<sup>364</sup> They recognized implicitly that the jurisdiction of the *majhi* was, as mentioned earlier, of a kind that made a distinction between the “secular” and the “religious” difficult. The policies of the princely regime however forced the division of these functions so that the *majhi* and *gaita* was no longer the same person. Though the *majhi* became the crucial “secular” link between the princely state and the village or *pargana* communities and as mark of his position, was given a red turban to wear on ceremonial occasions, he could not be kept from “religious” practices and continued to work with the *gaita*.<sup>365</sup>

This tradition of distinguishing the *majhi* through the grant of a turban has been maintained by the post-colonial state during the Dasehra celebrations in Jagdalpur even though the system of village headman is no longer in operation at least in the official organization of local government in Bastar.<sup>366</sup> In Kanker, the *majhi/patel* have similarly been important historically, and are still considered to be the leaders of the *bhumkal* in the *anga dev* cosmology even though their “secular” powers have been greatly reduced over time. Though there seems to have been no special dress for them, in the context of their recent mobilization around the Dasehra in Kanker, they have, in imitation of their Bastar counterparts, started a campaign directed at the district administration to get the right to wear a ceremonial turban recognizing their historical standing and continuing present-day position in village society.

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<sup>364</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 284-297; Elwin, *The Muria*, 10.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 2.

The *gaita* and *majhi* are almost always men. However, I came across a few cases when the *gaita* and *majhi* were women. In Thema, there is a story of a *gaita-dokri* (old woman *gaita*) who had exceptional powers and was always surrounded by tigers that guarded her. The tiger is one of the most feared denizens of the village landscape and power over the tiger represents one of the highest abilities in mastering the forces of the *bhum*. I will speak more of this in the following chapter. In the ritually significant shrine of the Panch Dev on the foot of the Garhiya Pahar, it is Lakshmi Dehari, the middle-aged daughter of the Dehari *gaita* family, who is the *gaita* of the deity complex. Lakshmi has acquired a name for herself as the keeper of the Panch Dev, and has even contested and won an election to the Kanker municipality. In Kurutola, where the Kange clan held its clan *jatra* in late February this year, the chief *gaita-majhi* was “Rajmata,” the wife of the late Kangla Majhi, a towering figure in the *adivasi* mobilization in central India of the 1950s about whom I shall have more to say in the conclusion. But such cases of women *gaita/majhi* are exceptions.

Just as the *gaita* acts along with the *majhi*, they both exercise their powers within the *anga dev* system through the *baithak/panchayat* (meeting/assembly/council) of the village *siyan*. The term *panchayat* in this case, used to denote the decision-making body of gods as well as the *siyan* in the *anga dev* practices as we have seen in the *iqrarnama*, should not be confused with the elected body that comprises the local government under the Panchayati Raj Constitutional (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act of 1993<sup>367</sup> (extended to “tribal” areas in 1996)<sup>368</sup>. In order to avoid confusion, I use the term *baithak* for this body.

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<sup>367</sup> *Panchayati Raj Act official website*, <http://panchayat.gov.in/> (accessed February 12, 2012).

<sup>368</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 259.

Grigson and Elwin both noted the widespread presence of village *panchayats* in Bastar in the 1930s and recognized its comprehensive jurisdiction over the life of the village communities. Critiquing the Bastar princely state's attempt at introducing new, top-down administration which disturbed the life of the village and opened them to exploitation through the state's economic policies, Grigson argued that the Bastar village *panchayat* comprised a "ready to hand nucleus of an organization which, if properly handled and fostered, could in time save the state much money spent on law and justice, police and general administration."<sup>369</sup> He did not, however, relate this insight to any need to transform the "state" itself and construed his advice as one about a matter of convenience and economy only.

In the administrative records of the princely state of Kanker, we hardly come across any mention let alone discussion of the *baithak/panchayat*. From what can be found today in the villages of Kanker, and from the *iqrarnama*, it could be argued that like in Bastar, the *baithak/panchayats* at the village and *pargana* levels, centering on the *anga dev* cosmology, were the decision making bodies of the *bhumkal*. From their continuing centrality to village life in Kanker and from the *iqrarnama* of the post-colonial period, it could also be said that until recently, that is until the mid-1990s when the *panchayat* system of the Indian state was made operational in tribal regions, the *anga dev baithak/panchayats* were the most important organization of local self-government.

The *anga dev baithak* comprises the *siyan* of the village society. Though the term *siyan*, in the plural and the singular, means "old," it is most commonly used to refer to all the male heads of families who participate in the *baithak*. Among them the older ones are the most respected. The *siyan* women or *dokri* are also respected, especially if they are

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<sup>369</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 284.

widows, but do not participate in the *baithak*. In several instances, they would sit close to the *baithak* and speak to it once in a while. This is in contrast to the *jatra* where women participate more fully. The authority of the *majhi* and the *gaita* are in some senses only notional and it is the *baithak* of the *siyan* that represents the *bhumkal* and takes all the decision on its behalf.

In the villages of Kanker there is an open discussion at the *baithak*: the *majhi* and *gaita* are given no special voice. In fact I saw that from the *majhi* and *gaita* to the recently initiated young men, everyone speaking at the *baithak* shows great courtesy to his audience. It is only on the prodding of the others that the person speaks strongly. There are hardly ever any monologues or final statements but conversations that gently achieve a discussion. In the *baithak* where I was present, whether at the palace or in the villages, the *siyan* would defer to me, the raja, only when they had taken a decision. Attempts by villagers to approach me separately were frowned upon though not stopped. The *baithak* can also censure and remove a *gaita* and *majhi* but if the removed notables are from the founding family there replacements are either their sons or brothers.

The weight that a *siyan's* voice carries in the *baithak* depends on his ability to understand the arrangement of the forces of the *bhum*. The opinion of *gaita* and *majhi*, very old persons, *kotwar*, *sirha* and *guniya* (from *guni* or wise, those with knowledge of diseases and their cure) – people who are associated closely with the deities, have knowledge of the past or special skills – is valued greatly. A description of village leadership in tribal areas given by A. M. Somasundaram resonates with the situation in Kanker very well:

Tribal/village leaders are not those who possess property or wealth...they are expected to lead their people out of harm's way, to warn them of impending

trouble or calamity...to organize methods of exploiting the resources of the habitat... Their position depends on their ability to foretell the wrath of god, to grasp the nature of the problem, to prepare clansmen to face positive or negative developments...<sup>370</sup>

It is this kind of leadership of the *bhumkal* that informs the *baithak* of the *siyan*.

Understandably, the *siyan* formed the most important source of accounts of the past.

As pointed out by Somasundaram, the families of *gaita* and *majhi* are not necessarily, despite their often hereditary positions in the *anga dev* practices, economically the more prosperous section of the *bhumkal*. Though in Manohar Netam's case the *bhumihar* family of the *majhi* and *gaita* of Masulpani owned the largest amount of land in the village, in most cases I found the *gaita* and *majhi* to often have average or below average land-holdings in their villages. As pointed out earlier, the *gaita* might not have land in the village at all. Usually, they comprise an economically indistinct part of the village economy of small land-holders/cultivators<sup>371</sup> who sell their excess produce at fixed prices to the government *mandi* (market center);<sup>372</sup> and who supplement their small incomes by labor, at fixed wage rates, in government-controlled public works, and lumbering and processing commodities from non-timber forest products for

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<sup>370</sup> A. M. Somasundaram, "Glimpses into the Primitive Cultures of India," *Man in India* XXX, No. 4, (1950): 30.

<sup>371</sup> In 1992, a study of agriculture in Kanker and Kondagaon (now separate districts) found that the average size of land holding was 2.61 hectares, 75% of the farmers had small and medium holdings, and that disparity in land-holdings was small. The percentage of landless population was also small. Family labor comprised 75% of the total labor input in the district of Kanker, exchange labor, where families provide reciprocal labor to each other at critical points in the agrarian cycle, 20%, and wage labor, 5%. H. S. Gupta and T. L. Verma, "State of Tribal Agriculture in North-East Bastar," in *New Dimensions in Agricultural Geography: Spatial Dimensions of Agriculture*, ed. Noor Mohammad (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1992), 69-79.

<sup>372</sup> The Chhattisgarh Government procures paddy at a Minimum Support Price MSP in about 1333 Primary Agricultural Societies across the state. Vivek Kumar Dhand et al., "Computerization of Paddy Procurement and Public Distribution System in Chhattisgarh," *E Governance in Practice*, [www.csisigegov.org/egovernance\\_pdf/26\\_216-223.pdf](http://www.csisigegov.org/egovernance_pdf/26_216-223.pdf) (accessed November 10, 2012).

contractors/traders based in urban and semi-urban centers of Kanker and neighboring districts. If anybody, it is the *malguzari* families of the colonial-princely regime who still comprise a small upper class of medium to big landholders in village society: but they do not occupy a necessarily superior position in the *anga dev* practices (I will say more about them later in this chapter).

The power exercised by the *siyan* in terms of punishment is limited and mitigable. The punishment for almost everything ranging from the breaking of marriage rules to theft and wizardry or witchcraft tends to be a fine or compensation in the form of propitiation comprising a feast. Grigson, in his study of the Marias of Bastar, noted the rarity of ostracization or other harsher, physical punishments.<sup>373</sup> Grigson also marked that if a person was not in a position to compensate, the villagers would wait for such a time when it became possible. Often, the entire village would help collect resources for the compensation. In Kanker as well, this is very much a norm. Harsh punishments have in any case become difficult to impose as the accused can always turn to the police to counteract the verdict of the *baithak*.

Here the role of the *kotwar* (village watchman) is important. The *kotwar* is a *siyan* who has traditionally handled what in modern common-sense discourse we would call “crime” within the ambit of the village society. As we had seen in the third chapter, the expansion of the police administration of the princely state often began by a co-option of the *kotwar* into the police *bandobast* centered on the raja’s court. This involved attempts to separate him from the *siyan* and the *baithak*. The *kotwar* however continued to be oriented towards the village rather than the court. In the post-colonial period, the *kotwar* has continued to be a village person but is paid by the police administration and reports

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<sup>373</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 284-298.

crimes to his superiors in the police more regularly. He has however retained some discretion and in matters that can be settled within the village, he still defers to the *baithak*.

Categories of people who often constitute an important voice in the *baithak* are the elected representatives of village society from the level of the local *panchayats* to politicians who are MLAs and MPs. Even though they draw their position from and respond primarily to the political and administrative arrangements of the post-colonial state which, despite its many enmeshments with the *anga dev* cosmology, remains somewhat of an alien presence. The implementation of the system of elected *panchayat* and *gram sabha* from 1996 onwards<sup>374</sup>, and the increasing government resources at their disposal since the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh in 2000, has created a parallel and more powerful system of local governance and administration in relation to the *anga dev baithak*. Together with the gradual transfer of “secular” jurisdiction to it, the ability of these *panchayats* to carry out developmental activities, implement social welfare schemes and manage land acquisition might gradually be shifting the balance of power away from the *baithak*.

In a few villages, this has created tension between the two leaderships, one deriving its legitimacy from an inherited local cosmology, practices and hierarchies, and the other, even with elections, emanating from, as Sundar says in the context of Bastar, a “paternalist plan...from above,”<sup>375</sup> from a different conception of the world and organization of power. In most cases however, members of the *panchayats* work closely

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<sup>374</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 256.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.



with the *anga dev baithak* if they are not already derived from it. The remarkable thing is the way in which the overlapping leadership of the *panchayats* and the *baithak* influence each other, the balance of power within the *bhumkal* and the arrangement of the village and its deities. Decision-making in the *panchayats* sometimes plays out through party politics with the two main political parties carrying competing agendas of their governments at the level of the state and the center. When each group seeks the support of and often ends up dividing the *baithak*, a complicated dynamic obtains.

In the April of 2012, a 45 year old *bhagat* of Khanda Dokra *anga dev* in Makri Singrai gave me an account that illustrates these tensions clearly.<sup>376</sup> My interlocutor became a *bhagat* when, during his youth, Khanda Dokra, who resides in a cave in the Makri hills, came to him in his dreams and asked him to offer worship. Consequently, the *bhagat* started associating with the work of his village deities, would often get possessed by Khanda Dokra when the deity wanted to speak to the villagers and became a *guniya* by gathering knowledge of traditional medicine. He also began working for tribal rights, the conservation of forests and hills that were being whittled down by construction companies for building material and the preservation of the culture and tradition of the *bhumkal*. Once he challenged the doctors of the government Komal Deo Hospital in Kanker to prove that their medicine was superior to his. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the *bhagat* began doing political work for the local MP, and became the *sarpanch* (head of the *panchayat*) of his *panchayat* twice in the 1990s. His rise to prominence attracted the jealousy of his rivals (*jalaao log* or jealous people) in his own and the opposition parties.

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<sup>376</sup> Conversation with a *bhagat*, 04.13.12, Kanker. The sensitive nature of this story, which is only a point of view, requires that the name of my interlocutor not be revealed.

More recently, at the time of a rain divination ceremony when he was supposed to intercede with Khanda Dokra for the *bhumkal*, his political rivals accused him of having tied up and emasculated the gods. This allegation, he argued, was closely connected with political competition in the *panchayat* connected with the distribution of drought compensation to the villagers. Eventually however, the *bhagat*'s propitiation of the gods bore fruit and it rained very heavily. This was enough, he said, to silence his rivals: but he lamented that unless the work of the deities was kept away from partisan politics, the proper arrangement of the village would be in tatters (*devta-dhami ke kaam la gutbazi se door nahin rakhbo to sab chharra ho jahi*).

On the whole, the *panchayats* are often the most enthusiastic organizer of *anga dev* practices. *Panchayat* funds are often liberally given to the *baithak*, which otherwise collects money for *jatra*, *madaï* and other *anga dev* events in the form of paltry contributions of money, food and other ritual material from the *bhumkal*. Under the influence of the *panchayats*, the village *baithak* often plan and organize events through *anga dev* "committees" which have systematic structures, leadership and division of work like in the bureaucratic system. Unlike traditionally, where either the *gaita* or *kotwar*, or both, accompanied by a couple of young men, would go from house to house, village to village, informing people about, inviting them to and collecting contributions from them for the event, *panchayat* clerks are often deputed to spread the word around and letters are printed and sent by the state postal service to far off places. I saw such new methods at work most clearly at Kongera, Bhawgir-Nawagaon and Gada Gauri. Manohar Netam's initiative also relied upon such committees at various levels.

In the preceding chapter, we have already seen some of the ways in which local MPs and MLAs, and other politicians of the higher levels of political authority like ministers, associate with the *anga dev* practices. Though most of this occurs in their individual/personal capacity, they are often able to bring state patronage to deities, and their practices and places of worship, in terms of funds and administrative support even though this is done in the name of “culture” and “religion.” Where the raja of Kanker is not present, they sometimes take his place in the rituals though this is true only for village level events. It is quite clear however that the political and social status of these categories of persons is closely tied to their patronage of popular cosmology and practices. They invariably visit the shrine of their local deity and deities of regional significance both for important occasions in their scheme of things (pre and post-elections, etc.) as well as events of the *anga dev* cosmological calendar; and give funds for these events or for the repair or building of shrines either before elections or as soon as they are elected.

The case of my father’s close associate Arvind Netam, the longest serving MP of Kanker, its most senior politician and also one of my main informants (with his wealth of knowledge about the *anga dev* cosmology and the *bhumkal* of Kanker) illustrates very well the relation in which the elected representatives often are to *anga dev* practices. Netam told me that his family originally came from a village close to Chitrakote in Bastar: about four generations ago, his ancestors moved to Umaradah in Kanker. His ancestors had established the village, so his family became its traditional *majhi-gaita*. However, not much later, the family moved once again towards Durg to the north of

Kanker. In the time of his grandfather, his family returned to Kanker to settle in Dabena as its *malguzar*.

Netam's family later came to understand their links to Umaradah when one of his sisters, who had not been keeping well for 3-4 years, was advised by a *sirha* in Belar to propitiate their clan deity in Umaradah. After much testing by the best *sirha* of the area, they as well as the people of Umaradah, who had always known that the real keeper of the *anga dev* in Umaradah was an outsider and a Netam, accepted the old relationship between the Netam family and the village. A member of the Netam family, and since he became an MP in 1970, Arvind Netam himself, begin the *madai* ceremony in Umaradah every year by hoisting and circumambulating the *madai* grounds with their *anga dev*.

Netam's father Jhadu Ram was part of Bhanu Deo's circle and was asked by him to stand for election for the seat of MLA from Kanker once Bhanu Deo's relinquished it in 1967. After the death of his father, until the late 1990s, except for a brief spell during the aftermath of the National Emergency in 1977-80, Netam and, for a short period, his wife have held the MP seat from Kanker. When my father died in 2000, at my *pagdi rasm* (coronation ceremony) at the palace, Netam addressed the *bhumkal* and proclaimed the anointing of the new raja even as the *anga dev* stood in attendance outside. This ceremony marked the ways in which older regimes of power overlap with newer ones through the mediation of the *anga dev* practices; and demonstrates how questions of sovereign power and authority are not already always settled in the various regimes of power that comprise the world of the *anga dev*. Of the many aspects of the older colonial-princely regime that continue to play an important part in the *anga dev* practices,

the role of the former *malguzars* needs closer study. I pursue this question in the section that follows.

### **The Raja's Functionaries in Village Society**

The *anga dev baithak* often have a powerful category of participants who are at once a part of as well as stand out from the village *siyan* because historically they are the most recognizable outside entrants in village society and their position was owed to the raja of Kanker. These are the former *malguzars* or revenue collectors of the colonial-princely regime. We know about the *malguzars* of Kanker from the *Kanoon Mal* of 1909, where there are regulations governing *malguzari* or revenue collection rights.<sup>377</sup> The revenue collectors are referred to as either *malguzar*, *thekedar* or *gaontia*. The *Kanoon Mal* does not mention the history of *malguzari* in Kanker, nor is there a discussion of this in the administrative records. Though we know about the details of the *malguzari* practices in Kanker from the time of the publication of the *Kanoon Mal*, it is clear that *malguzari* was not begun in but systematized in 1909. Most *malguzari* families in Kanker trace their status as *malguzars* back to the late nineteenth century.

Whatever was the nature of *malguzari* before 1909, from that time onwards *malguzars* were persons who bought revenue collection rights for the villages. A large number of them were upper caste Brahmins and Thakurs attached to the raja's court in Kanker, but many of them were also Gond and village caste persons residing in the villages. Of the castes, I came across *malguzari* families who are from the Dhimar, Nai and Marar castes. Since *malguzari* was not a hereditary right but one that had to be

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<sup>377</sup> Tiwari, *Kanoon Mal*, Clauses 40-131.

bought from year to year,<sup>378</sup> it is possible that persons from other village castes too held *malguzari* rights at some point or the other. The Brahmin and Thakur *malguzari* families held *malguzari* rights most continuously. Sometimes Brahmin families held *malguzari*, or revenue-collection rights, not through purchase but through revenue-free grants of villages.

When the *malguzars* were not from village society but residents of the capital town of Kanker and bought rights for the same set of villages almost on a regular basis, as in the case of Brahmins and Thakurs, they also invested in land and agriculture in these villages. The *malguzars* were meant to support the policies of the colonial-princely state and constituted its closest intervention in the affairs of the village. They were expected to establish ties with the village notables for the purpose of revenue collection and the management of *begar* (unpaid labor for rudimentary public works). Their coercive presence in village society, without adequate armed support from the princely state (as we have seen in the previous chapter in the discussion of the administration of the princely state), required that they ingratiate themselves with local society. An effective way of doing so was to associate with the worship and propitiation of deities of the villages. In cases where the *malguzars* had advance rights over the revenue of villages that they were expected to settle, it was easier to become part of the *bhumkal* because they had a founding role in the settlement of the village.

The *siyan* of the villages I visited often remembered *malguzars* ambivalently both as exploitative figures who gave the raja very little and took a lot more from the villages, as well as integral parts of the *bhumkal* whose participation in the *anga dev* practices made the practices more effective and successful. On balance however, it is the latter

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

sentiment that is more powerful among the *siyan*. The family history of 40 year old Ashit Kumar Dubey, one of my key resource persons in north Bastar, illustrates the successful integration of Brahmin *malguzars* into the *anga dev* cosmology of the north Bastar-Kanker continuum.<sup>379</sup>

Dubey is from the *malguzari* family of the villages of Pipra and Bahigaon in north Bastar, the southern part of the *anga dev* region of which Kanker forms the northern end. I will discuss more about this in the following chapter. Today, his elder brother and he are central in the *anga dev* ceremonies of the 22 Muria majority villages around Pipra and Bahigaon of which his family had held the *malguzari* rights from the raja of Bastar since 1850. According to him, his family, when it had first moved up to this northern and hilly frontier of the princely state of Bastar from Jagdalpur around 1850, found only nomadic Muria communities living in this area.

Dubey's family settled these communities, built a temple for their ancestral deities, gave the people implements, cattle and seed for cultivation, built granaries to provide for famines, organized communal labor for village work and provided cure for ailments and diseases to the people and to cattle. Dubey said that his ancestors would cultivate their own fields only when they had ensured that all the other fields in the village had been cultivated. Because of these reasons, the Muria communities of their *malguzari* recognized the ability of his family to secure the villages from harm and gave them a pre-eminent position in their *anga dev* practices. Indeed, I was struck by the extent to which the villages of the old Pipra-Bahigaon *malguzari* still respect the Dubey family, but more importantly, how much Dubey knew about the *anga dev* cosmology and felt one with it.

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<sup>379</sup> Conversation with Ashit Dubey, 04.20.12, Kanker.

The highest level of the Brahmin-*anga dev* integration, as also the subsumption of the Brahmanic in the local, can be seen in Kanker where the Brahmin *raj-purohit* of the princely state also acts as the chief *gaita* of Chhote and Bade Pat. The *raj-purohit* of Kanker is also from a Dubey Brahmin family that traces its association to the rajas of Kanker back to Veer Kanhar Deo, the 14<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Chandravansh dynasty.<sup>380</sup> Apart from offering ritual propitiation to Chhote and Bade Pat, the *raj-purohit* also officiates as the *gaita* at the *madai* and Dasehra celebrations at the palace, when *anga dev* from across Kanker assemble at the palace.

The actual task of looking after Chhote Pat however, or being his *gaita*, has historically been with the Halba people. The Halba are designated in administrative classification as a distinct Gond tribe of southern Chhattisgarh.<sup>381</sup> They have their own language called “Halbi,” which is different from Gondi and has replaced Gondi as the main language of the Gond people in Bastar.<sup>382</sup> Grigson and Elwin believed that the Halba were the descendants of the soldier class of the Gonds who had manned the *garh* (fort) of the medieval Gond kingdoms of central India.<sup>383</sup> Elwin also observed that the Halba often served as the *gaita* of the *anga dev* among the Muria people.<sup>384</sup> In Kanker, the Halba occupy a special position in relation to the ceremonies of kingship. They claim the right to anoint the raja at the time of his coronation, a privilege due to the Brahmin *raj-purohit* in normative Rajput ruling traditions.

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<sup>380</sup> *Raj-Purohit Vanshavali*, Kanker: Rakesh Sharma Private Papers.

<sup>381</sup> Grigson, *The Maria Gonds*, 42.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., Elwin, *The Muria*, 12.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.



Though the ruling dynasty's claim to Rajput status necessitated the ritual primacy of Brahmins in dynastic ceremonies and their patronage through temple-building and land-grants, the political significance of the *anga dev* cosmology and practices meant that the Brahmins became secondary in the schema of royal rituals and the Brahmanic itself became part of the local cosmology. In any case, in popular perception, the Brahmins of Kanker have had a chequered history of patronage in princely Kanker. The story about the murder of Komal Deo's Brahmin *diwan* Durga Prasad is illustrative of this.<sup>385</sup> It is said that in his time, Narharideo invited few Brahmin families from the pilgrimage center of Rajim in Raipur to settle in Kanker. In time these families became very powerful.

One of them, Durga Prasad, was appointed the teacher of young Komal Deo and eventually became the *diwan* when Komal Deo became the ruler of Kanker. Durga Prasad misused his office, side-lined the raja and distributed lands and *malguzaris* to Brahmin families unchecked. Popular disaffection against Durga Prasad and his Brahmin coterie grew in the court and among the village people who suffered under their exactions. Sensing a groundswell of anger against the Brahmins, and hoping to wrest effective power back for himself, Komal Deo hatched a plot to kill Durga Prasad and had him murdered in his sleep. Following Durga Prasad's murder, Komal Deo banished most of the Brahmins from Kanker. Only later in his regime did he reinstate some of them but with much reduced power and lands.

The case of the other upper caste group in the Kanker villages, the Rajput Thakurs, also suggests their integration into the *anga dev* practices although more research is required here. At the moment I suggest a tentative hypothesis gathered from

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<sup>385</sup> I have heard this from many people. One version of it appears in Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 128-132.

my research and field-work. Though Valyani and Sahasi write that Veer Kanhar Deo came to Kanker with a band of warriors,<sup>386</sup> we do not find evidence of a Rajput *bhaibandh* (brotherhood) attached to the raja. Younger brothers of the rajas over generations were also not given separate jurisdictions through *zamindari* rights as is evident from the fact that there are no such splinter lineages in my larger family in Kanker. From my conversations with them, it became clear that most Thakur families settled in Kanker only in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.<sup>387</sup> They claim their ancestry back to a family of seven brothers in Nipanitipani, presently in the northern Durg district and a Gond majority area, an account that parallels the most common account of the origin of Gond clans in Kanker that too claims the origin of the Gonds in a family of seven brothers.

Given the possible local and perhaps Gond roots of the family of the raja himself (to which I shall come shortly), one could argue, following Surojit Sinha, that the Rajput elements in Gond majority areas of central India, including Kanker, represent the elevation of particular Gond groups through Sanskritization into a political class of rulers attached to local state formations.<sup>388</sup> The title “Thakur” is common among Gonds who claim to be from the clan or village founding families. However, it is important to point out that the case of Kanker shows the possibility of the reverse process as well, where the Rajputs can be seen as seeking legitimation of status through the adoption of local, non-

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 8-81.

<sup>387</sup> Although I spoke to scores of Thakur families, my chief interlocutors were Uday Singh Thakur, 70+, and Bhuwaneshwar Singh Thakur, 60+, both from established *malguzari* families, with whom I spoke in Kanker on 06.01.2012. The former is also the Vice-President of the “Kshatriya Samaj (Society) of Chhattisgarh” and is researching the history of Rajputs in Chhattisgarh.

<sup>388</sup> Sinha, “State Formation and Rajput Myth,” 35-80.

Sankritic, *anga dev* practices. We see here once again the problems of adhering to a neat tribe-caste division in marking communities.

The socialization of the Thakurs into the cosmology of the *anga dev* is quite clear in Kanker. They propitiate the *anga dev* as much as any other group, form part of the *baithak* and participate fully in the *anga dev* practices. An example will bear this out. Bhuwaneshwar Singh Thakur of the Thakur *malguzari* family of Sakra-Nagri recalled episodes from the time of his *malguzar* grandfather, one of the most respected peoples among the Thakurs in his time, when unless a Gond *gaita* was officiating and worship could be offered to all the village gods in the correct sequence of the divine hierarchy, the propitiation of the deities would not be completed. Such accounts are commonly available among Thakur *malguzari* families in Kanker. Thakur *malguzar* families in the villages of Kanker thus seem to form a part of the *bhumkal* through the kind of claims made by Dubey in the case of Pipra-Bahigaon.

The issue of “insider-outsider” has however been a significant feature in tribal-non-tribal relations in tribal majority areas across India and is worth revisiting here in the context of the Brahmin and Rajput Thakur *malguzars*. Sundar has pointed out in her study of Bastar that when non-tribal migration has been considerable and related to the extension of exploitative economic relations from the outside, tribal-non-tribal conflict has been a common occurrence.<sup>389</sup> As pointed out earlier, the *malguzars* do represent the intervention of the colonial-princely regime in village society; and comprise a small upper stratum of land-holders in it.

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<sup>389</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 257-262.

However, these *malguzars* lost a considerable amount of land with the implementation of land ceiling laws in 1961 in the undivided state of Madhya Pradesh of which Chhattisgarh was a part.<sup>390</sup> With the end of the colonial-princely regime in which the *malguzars* had been entitled to *begar*,<sup>391</sup> and given the positive land-man ratio in southern Chhattisgarh,<sup>392</sup> they subsequently found it difficult to find cheap labor for cultivating their land. The fixing of minimum wages,<sup>393</sup> and recent government schemes that make food grain available at minimum prices<sup>394</sup> and offer guaranteed employment in public works,<sup>395</sup> have further reduced their ability to manage rural labor. Since the state is the primary buyer of food grain, and does so at fixed rates, and forest produce is contracted to absentee urban traders, the economic position of the *malguzars* has declined to a large degree. For these reasons, the Brahmin and Rajput Thakur *malguzar* families do not appear to be clearly above prosperous Gond and village caste persons economically. That many of the former *malguzars* are Gond and village caste people also

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<sup>390</sup> Sita Ram Singh, *Land Reforms and Farm Diversity* (Delhi: APH Publishing, 2005), 221.

<sup>391</sup> The administrative records of the colonial-princely regime show the British officials, in the years 1941-46, to be very concerned about *begar*. *AAR, 1941-46*.

<sup>392</sup> In 1992, the actual pressure of population was 2.457 persons per hectare of cropped land in Kanker and Kondagaon. Gupta and Verma, "The State of Tribal Agriculture," 77.

<sup>393</sup> *Department of Labour, Government of Chhattisgarh official website*, [cglabour.gov.in](http://cglabour.gov.in) (accessed September 26, 2012).

<sup>394</sup> Under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) of the Government of India, the Government of Chhattisgarh makes available 35 kgs. of rice a month at Rs. 3/- per kg. to about 3.7 million families that are below the poverty line (BPL) as against Rs. 6. 25/- for other parts of India. Dhand, etc., "Computerization of Paddy Procurement," 217.

<sup>395</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act official website*.

prevents the separation of groups within the old *malguzari* stratum in terms of their caste markers.<sup>396</sup>

In the context of the movement for a tribal homeland in Chhotanagpur, a historical-anthropological study in 1967 explored the meaning of the pejorative term *diku*, hitherto understood as “outsider” and “non-tribal,” among tribal communities there.<sup>397</sup> The study found that the term *diku* variously referred to “trouble-makers, deceivers and those with a superior-air,” and could be applied as much to tribal people as to caste Hindu groups.<sup>398</sup> Further, it appeared that there was no “self-conscious effort at rationalizing and crystallizing a negative image” of non-tribal peoples.<sup>399</sup> The study pointed out that those, including Brahmins and other upper caste groups, who shared the “religious-ritual life” of the local communities, could certainly not be called “outsiders.”<sup>400</sup> Likewise, in the case of upper caste *malguzars* of Kanker, the extent of integration into local society is such that the sentiment of “outsider” does not attach to them easily. In fact their integration into the *anga dev* cosmology demonstrates one of the many ways in which the raja’s regime had accepted terms of power not its own. Let us

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<sup>396</sup> It is the traders of more recent migration into Kanker, and settled largely in the urban and semi-urban areas in Kanker and neighboring district headquarters, who have taken their place as the rich upper class of Kanker. They draw their wealth from the leasing of forest areas from the state for timber and non-timber forest products, the purchase of grain that comes into the market through distress sale and by putting out work in the villages for the processing of non-timber forest products that they manage from their urban bases. These traders have otherwise very little contact with village society. They, and the state when it unilaterally acts to procure local resources like the forests, I would argue, constitute the extractive side of economic relations in Kanker. This, however, requires further study and research.

<sup>397</sup> S. C. Sinha, Jyoti Sen and Sudhir Panchbhair, “The Concept of Diku among the Tribes of Chhotanagpu,” *Man in India* XLIX, No. 2 (1969): 121.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-128.

now explore the ways in which the chief authority and symbol of the colonial-princely regime, the raja, is seen within these multiple realms and relations of power in the world of the *anga dev*.

### **The Raja among the Forces of the *Bhum***

We have already seen many instances of how the raja and his regime exist intertwined with the realms of the ancestral and non-ancestral forces of the *bhum*, and the community and hierarchies of the *bhumkal*. We have also seen how the raja's powers appear checked and balanced in so many instances, whether it is the case of territorial organization of the *pargana*, his lineage deity or functionaries. Is the raja of Kanker considered divine among the *bhumkal*? In what relationship to the *bhumkal* and its cosmology does he exist?

In the comparable case of the raja of Bastar, Elwin writes confusingly of the raja's divinity.<sup>401</sup> To start with, he lists the "Maharaja" (of Bastar) in the section for the Muria gods.<sup>402</sup> According to Elwin, "it is only the Earth, the Dead, the clan-god and the Maharaja which are ancient and fundamental to Muria worship and belief."<sup>403</sup> He points to the suffix "Deo" in the name of the raja as recognition of his divinity by the people. But then Elwin limits the acknowledgement of the raja's divinity to "the Muria and Maria of the Jagdalpur Tahsil and by some of the northern Muria," not even half of the territory or peoples of Bastar.<sup>404</sup> Sundar found that "in received wisdom...the king (of Bastar)

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<sup>401</sup> Elwin, *The Murias*, 179-183.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 183.

merely owed his power to his role as the chief priest” of Danteshwari.<sup>405</sup> Pravir, the last ruling chief of Bastar, seeking to rally his former subjects at the time of his rebellion against the Government of India in 1966, wrote an intemperate tract riling against those he perceived as his enemies titled *I Pravir – The Adivasi God*.<sup>406</sup> The claim is comprehensible only because as raja, in keeping with the popular belief echoed in Netam’s history, he had a divine aspect to him.

In the story about the origin of kingship in Kanker related by Manohar Netam, a story that is very popular, the first raja of the last ruling dynasty of Kanker (Chandravanshi) was touched by divine power. Valyani and Sahasi give us another, fuller version of the same story which, translated from Hindi by me, is as follows:

The legend is that the first ruler of this dynasty (Chandravansh) was Veer Kanhar Deo who was the raja of Jagannath Puri in Orissa. When he was afflicted by leprosy, he had to leave his kingdom. Disappointed with his life, he started wandering here and there. After wandering around aimlessly he reached the land of *tapasya* (meditation) of the great *rishis* (sages), Sihawa. He started spending his time in devotion to god near the *ashram* (hospice) of Shringi *rishi*. One night in a dream, he was told that if he bathed in the stream near the sage’s hospice, he would be cured of his affliction. With full faith in his dream, Veer Kanhar Deo bathed in the stream, was cured of leprosy and his body started shining. The residents of Sihawa were so impressed by this miracle that they made him their raja.<sup>407</sup>

In Netam’s history and this recounting, the raja is a powerful force of the *bhum*, imbued with divinity, whose powers are joined with that of the ancestors to keep the balance of the *bhum*. Like in Bastar, the rajas of Kanker suffix the word ‘Deo/Dev’ to their title, a term that puts them on par with the deities.

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<sup>405</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 61.

<sup>406</sup> Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo, *I Pravir – The Adivasi God* (Jagdalpur: PCB Deo, 1965). Interestingly, in the years following his death in 1966, due to popular perception of him as a martyr to the cause of the tribal peoples, he has been virtually deified.

<sup>407</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 80.

This elevated position of the raja of Kanker is strengthened, and a little transformed, in popular perception through accounts of the raja's armed conquest of various parts of Kanker: this is a point to which I will return in the next chapter. The element of coercion and extraction then become important aspects of the popular understandings of the raja. From the late nineteenth century onwards, to which most of the conquest accounts can be traced, we know that the people of Kanker were gradually subjected by the raja to regular revenue payments. From the first quarter of the twentieth century, when the *malguzari* regulations took effect, the older *siyan* recall many instances of undue and forceful exactions of revenue by the *malguzars* of the raja. From the last years of princely rule, the *siyan* talk of the increasing administrative intervention of the raja's government in their lives. The picture of a divine and all-powerful raja appears complete from these perspectives.

Yet there are many ways in which the divinity and power of the raja get domesticated and thus contained. We have seen the thin line that divides the divine from the non-divine in earlier discussions of the deities of the villages of Kanker. The ancestral forces have both divine and human qualities. In their ability to have some control over the ancestral forces, the people of the *bhumkal* also participate in a world in which divinity is not a distinct and inaccessible realm but can be touched and shared. There are also many levels and forms of divinity. The raja too falls within this realm.

While the raja has divinity literally washed into him in the account given by Valyani and Sahasi earlier, at the same time it is the recognition of his divinity by the people that elevates him to the position of raja. In this election of the raja, the *bhumkal* make conditional his divinity and power. Further, the raja's ancestors are seen as merged



into those of the people. As such, like the ancestors who are at once human and divine, chided as well as worshipped, the raja is also seen as both a kin of the *bhumkal* as well as divine. The raja's possession of Chhote and Bade Pat Anga Dev, just as the *bhumkal* have their own *anga dev*, completes the domestication of the raja within the *anga dev* cosmology. We must remember that in Netam's account, it is because the raja accepted the powers of the *anga dev* that the people made him the raja. The raja's position depends on his ability to participate in the balancing of the forces of the *bhum*, of which he is himself a critical part, and therefore in subjecting himself to the requirements of that balance. This is true of kingship more generally everywhere.

In this particular formulation, the term "raja" plays into memories of early ancestors and clan founders who are often referred to in the *anga dev* accounts as raja. Just like Elwin noted the use of the word raja in the case of Lingo, the Gond cult hero, in the account of the origin of the Gonds, I found the word raja being used for many *anga dev* in Kanker. In these accounts, the *barho* or *pargana* areas under particular *anga dev* were referred to as their *raj* (realm), and their jurisdiction as *raj-pat* (rule). In the form of Bade and Chhote Pat *anga dev*, the figure of the ancestral raja merges with that of the raja of Kanker. From Darro's account about how the royal *anga dev* came to be with the raja of Kanker, it appears that the clan gods of the Nahars of the Bhanupratap-pur region were adopted by the raja of Kanker. We must remember that one of the dynasties that ruled Kanker, the Kandra, was of the Nahar lineage.

Though the last dynasty to rule Kanker, to which my family belongs, claimed Rajput status, I have come across several conversations about Komal Deo, especially in Govindpur where he resided like a hermit away from the palace in Kanker for the larger

part of his reign, which speak of him as the “Kala Raja” or the “Black King.” Studies of political formations in central India have looked at ways in which Gond ruling lineages in medieval and early modern periods have claimed fictitious Rajput genealogies to buttress their claims to power.<sup>408</sup> The description “Kala,” in reference to the dark complexion of “tribal” peoples, for *raja*, might indicate a similar process in Kanker. The idea of the “Kala Raja” represents a familiarization and thus containment of a force that, on its own, claims sovereign power and authority.

Having looked at the various forces of the *bhum* and the *bhumkal*, let me explore more closely the meaning and process of achieving a balance of forces in the *bhum*; and mark the ways in which the various realms and relations of power play out through the requirements of this balance. In doing so, it is necessary to attend particularly to the fate of the *raja*’s claim to sovereign power and authority. For this purpose, it will help to recall and reprise various discussions presented earlier in the chapter, in the introductory chapter and in the discussion of the *igrarnama*.

### **Balancing the Forces of the *Bhum***

It is in the midst of the various forces of the *bhum* discussed earlier that, from the time of the first settlement and cultivation, the life of the people of the village has taken shape. The village cosmology views the working of the world and the smooth conduct of life as the function of the proper relationship between the forces the *bhum*. In the *igrarnama* we have seen references to illness among humans and cattle, the question of rainfall and cultivation, feuds in the village or the family, and theft. There are also references to the disturbance of the proper arrangement of the village and its gods, the

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<sup>408</sup> Surojit Sinha, “State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India,” *Man in India* XXXXII, No. 1 (1962): 35.

trouble among gods and the spell of wizards and witches. Though in the *iqrarnama* these two sets of issues – the problem afflicting the village and the task to be performed to overcome it – get mixed up, in my study it became clear that the first set of issues were explained in terms of the second. For example, an epidemic or drought is seen as the result of the disturbance of the proper arrangements of the village and the gods.

If the village suffers disruptions in its life through infighting, illness, drought, theft, etc., the proper arrangement of the village and its constituent forces/deities is believed to have been disturbed (*gaon bigad gaya hai*). There could be various reasons for this. If a deity has not been properly propitiated, it could temporarily withdraw its beneficence or actively cause harm. A good example of this is the case of Shitala who is both the cause and the panacea for pox-like illnesses. Small troubles are often caused by the mischief of the *bairasu dev*. A common cause of harm to the village or to individuals is the maleficence of *tonha* or *tonhi*, who cast their spells on the *bhumkal* and deities alike. If they can tie up the deities or breach the protective circle made by them around the village, the *tonha* and *tonhi* can not only make the deities ineffective but also use their powers against them and the *bhumkal*. The ancestral deities, including the *anga dev*, can also corrupt and be corrupted in these ways.

As we saw in the *iqrarnama*, in the making of the village (*gaon banana*) therefore, the proper arrangement or configuration of these forces (*gaon aur devi-devta ka bandhej/intezam/bandobast*) is critical. The ancestral deities, as forces deriving from and ranged on the side of the *bhumkal*, are the crucial link in this argument. Due to their long experience in dealing with the forces of the *bhum* and because of their intimate presence among the people, the ancestors provide the *bhumkal* with the power that can be

brought to bear on the non-ancestral deities and other forces in this arrangement. While non-ancestral forces are worshipped through rituals of propitiation of their own, it is through the propitiation of their ancestral deities that the *bhumkal* intervene most effectively in their cosmic space, its arrangements and balance.

The rituals of propitiation consist of a wide repertoire of practices the most common of which are offering flowers, vermillion, oil and turmeric, sacrificing a goat or chicken, and feasting. I have so far used the term propitiation for both *puja* (worship) and *seva* (service), the terms by which these rituals are known. This is because apart from subsuming worship and service, the rituals in question are also acts of propitiation. By propitiation I mean to “make well-disposed or favorably inclined, to win or regain the favor of, to appease or conciliate.”<sup>409</sup> I have suggested earlier in this chapter that when the ancestors propitiated the forces of the *bhum*, and when the *bhumkal* propitiate their ancestors, they are in a way negotiating with them. In pointing to a blurring of boundaries between the divine and the human, I have also pointed to relationships other than those of worship between the deity and the people.

Rituals of propitiation for the ancestral deities are performed at every significant stage of life because a close connection with them has to be assiduously maintained so that they will intervene on behalf of the *bhumkal* if required. Elwin described this vividly in the context of the Marias and Murias of Bastar:

The Marias and Murias like to associate their dead in all activities dear to them...before they drink they drop for the earth and the dead...At every turn of human life, at every prayer that is offered, and every ceremony performed, the dead are invoked...They are implored to protect the new born, to bless and make fertile the marriage bed, to protect children, to save the village from wild beasts,

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<sup>409</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online.*

to keep famine far away, to ensure plentiful rainfall, to make crops rich and punctual, to bring success in hunting or fishing...<sup>410</sup>

Rituals of propitiation are also performed to ward off or cure illness among humans and cattle. The ancestors are remembered at every stage of the agrarian cycle, when the seeds are collected (*bija-nikalni*), the field is inspected and prepared for cultivation (*dhela-kukri*), the crop is sown (*bhaji-jagana*), the ploughs are rested after completion of sowing (*hareli*), the crop takes firm roots and begins to sprout (*pura*), the crop begins to ripen (*bal-todna*) and when the crop is harvested and the new grain is ready to eat (*naya-khani*). Ancestral forces are also propitiated for success in elections, jobs, examinations, new economic ventures and court cases; and completion of projects for road and dam building, and other public works of benefit to the villages. The ancestors are propitiated in ceremonies of their own like *akti*, an annual event when the entire family gathers to honor its ancestors, and the *jatra*, when every three or four years the clan offers worship to its clan-founder or the village or *pargana* to its *anga dev*.

Although the *bhumkal* seeks the intervention of all ancestors to restore the proper arrangements of the village/deities/forces, the most widely approached and hierarchically superior deities in this context are the *anga dev*. The *anga dev*, as we have seen, are the highest level of deity in the system of ancestral deities which is central to the cosmology of the villages of Kanker. The mobility of the *anga dev*, which allows them to travel widely, and the fact that they can make their mind known in full view and quite precisely, are aspects of these deities that lend themselves well to their function.

The proper arrangement of village and gods is often maintained and the balance of forces stabilized through taboos of access to deities and sacred landscape. Bachelors

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<sup>410</sup> Elwin, "Funerary Customs in Bastar State," 92-93.

and menstruating women seem to be the most commonly barred categories of people but almost all kinds of persons seem to be subjected to one or the other kind of restriction in relation to the sacred across the villages of Kanker. In the village of Devi-Nawagaon in north Kanker, the landscape is a bewildering regime of inclusion and exclusion based on gender, age, marital and social status. As seen at Kongera and Gada Gauri, the cave location of the *anga dev*, though originally a site of refuge and sanctuary, often takes the form of an exclusive seat where access is rarely available to the *bhumkal*.

Even the raja does not escape these taboos. In the Garhiya Pahar, the raja is allowed to climb up only if he sacrifices a goat at each step. If this is not done, it is believed that much harm will come to the raja and the *bhumkal*. In Kongera, where women are not allowed to see Kongal Deo *anga dev*, Komal Deo's queen Shivrindini Devi, whose relationship to the deity was strong, was allowed to view him only through nine intervening curtains. In Govindpur, when I was being shown around the various places of the gods in the *dev-kothar*, at the top of a small hill there is a large cavernous rock inside which some deities reside. Access to this shrine is prohibited to bachelors. Since I am unmarried, confusion ensued and the *siyan* debated whether I, as a bachelor raja, could be allowed to enter the shrine. Eventually the majority felt that I could do so, though conversation about this matter continued afterwards. The term *bandhej* refers precisely to these kinds of arrangements whose transgression can produce trouble or cause harm.

In resolving situations of distress resulting from the disturbance of the proper arrangement of life-forces in the villages, and therefore in maintaining the general balance of forces, the *anga dev* cosmology provides for another practice which, I will

argue, informs and organizes, to some degree or other, the entire cosmological space of the *bhum* and *bhumkal* in Kanker. In the balance of relationships between the *bhumkal*, the ancestors and non-ancestral deified or other forces, and the raja, in other words the entire cosmological arena of the villages of Kanker, the act of *jaanchana* (interrogation/inquiry/test) is the final arbiter or determinant of power and significance of any force in the cosmic arrangement. Every entity in this cast of actors is open to a test of its efficacy as a life force within the balance of the *bhum*. It is this efficacy that determines the hierarchy of power and significance between the actors and their proper arrangement/balance in the sustenance of the world. While rituals of propitiation are resorted to in normal circumstances, testing is done in extraordinary times when the balance of forces has been disturbed and propitiation has failed.

The *anga dev* form the highest forum of inquiry and are called upon to inquire into the cause of distress and suggest a remedy for the situation. Either acting singly or together, or in association with other deities, the *anga dev* constitute the *panch*, or the highest decision-making body in village society. As we have seen, divining the cause of the disturbance of the proper arrangement of the village and its deities, and its restoration, is one of the most important tasks of the *anga dev*. In this role, the *anga dev* test the deities and other life forces in the villages to see whether they have not turned inimical or been imprisoned by hostile entities like the *bairasu dev* or *tonha-tonhi*. This often involves a *chhantni* or weeding of deities when the corrupted deity has to be found, either discarded or cleansed, and if it is the latter, re-consecrated and returned to its proper place. In turn, as indicated at several points earlier, the *anga dev* too can be put to the test by other gods and the *bhumkal*. It is these practices of propitiation and testing that the

*iqrarnama* deal with and with which the colonial-princely regime was centrally involved. The colonial-princely regime at once participated in (through the royal *anga dev*) as well as sought to control and rationalize these practices.

When, during the Dasehra celebrations in Kanker, the raja and the *anga dev* secure the *madai bhata*, together they throw a protective ring around the *bhumkal*. In the *madai* in the villages, and during the *jatra*, the deities of the villages similarly secure the village or *pargana* against harmful forces. Once the *bhum* has been closed off and secured, the *anga dev*, other deities and the people dance to mark and celebrate the balance of forces. The term used for this cosmic dance is *khelna* meaning play. There is a unique drumming rhythm for each deity. As the Gada drummer plays the rhythm for a particular deity, that deity moves into the center of the ritual ground that represents the *bhum*. One by one the deities come in and soon the ritual ground becomes a space of variously moving bodies of both deities and peoples. In smaller events, when only one drummer is present, he plays a mix of rhythms to which the dancing deities respond by coordinating their different movements. If there is a drummer for each deity, the deities dance to their own rhythm while weaving in and out of a central web. This play embodies the balance of the *bhum*. Its many actors – ancestral and non-ancestral forces, raja and the *bhumkal* – in various relations with each where no one goes unquestioned – dance out this balance. It is this play of power that I, as raja, have been subjected to and experienced.

At first glance, in the *iqrarnama*, the raja's *anga dev*, Chhote Pat, appears to occupy the highest level in the hierarchy of *anga dev*. Further, Bade Pat appears to be beyond test as he does not leave his abode in the temple of Bade Shitala, a practice that



probably represents a strategic exclusion by the raja of the elder of the two royal *anga dev* from the rough and ready terrain of the forces of the *bhum*. He goes out of his abode only twice a year during the annual *madai* and Dasehra celebrations to the raja's palace and to *madai bhata*. In this way, Bade Pat comes to acquire an aura that positions him above all *anga dev* and is seemingly protected from possible challenges that might be thrown at the royal *anga dev* during everyday ritual practices.

However, the many instances already mentioned in which the powers of the raja are held in check, and the *anga dev* accounts to which I will turn in the next chapter, have a more messy story to tell, one in which the sovereign claims of the raja of Kanker are rendered highly unstable and uncertain. In the play of the *anga dev* in the palace during *madai* and Dasehra, I have sensed how they subject the raja to a serious test. Symbolically, in laying siege to the raja's palace and in dragging the raja into their midst, the *anga dev* could be seen as tying-up the raja, embedding him in arrangements of their making, subjecting him to powers beyond his control. Indeed, several *siyan* have described the *madai* and Dasehra ceremonies to me in this way.

What emerges in this exploration is a world in which the distinctions between the time of the spirit and of the "state," the "secular-political" and the "religious," and the "divine" and the "human" get unsettled. In this time, colonial-princely, popular cosmological, and local and supra-local post-colonial political and administrative discourses are enmeshed one with the other; various discourses of community, of *bhumkal*, indigeneity and Sanskritization jostle for space. In this field of forces, power and authority in general, and claims to sovereignty in particular, take on different, un-state-like meanings and forms.

Rulers, peoples, ancestral spirits, gods and other entities appear in myriad relations of power with each other so that sovereign power and authority no longer appear as given and final, closed off in the notion of “state,” but are a matter of contestation and negotiation, and seem divided and shared. This is hardly the world of pristine, primitive, pre-political, homogeneous “tribal” communities in thrall to the regime of the “state.” Here the people, in their diversity, complex hierarchies and inherited notions of right and wrong, are actively involved in the making of their world in which polity is a larger, inclusive and open domain in which statist claims to rule are seriously questioned, entwined in local regimes of power and held in abeyance. The raja and various functionaries associated with him are part of this field of forces on terms markedly different from those they project in their claims. In the following chapter I explore the *anga dev* accounts of the past where in the maintaining the balance of the forces of the *bhum*, the raja’s claim to sovereign power and authority come under serious scrutiny and challenge.

## Chapter 6

### Polity and Sovereignty in the Anga Dev Accounts of the Past

In this chapter I explore the ways in which *anga dev* accounts of the past construct polity and sovereignty in princely Kanker. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, these accounts work on a trans-temporal terrain, where distinctions that we make between the time of the spirit and that of the “state” dissolve. It is a time both of the raja and the *angrez* as well as of ancestral spirits and gods. What we might mark as the “irrational” gets inextricably mixed with that which we understand as “rational.” These accounts work from the irreducible, shared time that we live in but divide and separate as “historical/political time” and “mythical/pre-political time” in disciplinary histories.

I treat these accounts and their content as political because, as Banerjee has argued and I have discussed in detail in the chapter on historiography, in the first place their designation as “pre-political” or “culture” is the result of their political contrariness to the “political” of the modern.<sup>411</sup> Disciplinary history limits the ambit of the political to the secular, rational time of the nation state and what it sets up its valid antecedents in the past. It hives off that which threatens its authority as “culture” and “religion.” I argue that these spheres of “culture” and “religion” are equally concerned with and form part of the domain of the political, and are as much concerned with the acquisition and exercise of power and authority. This domain is thus not limited to the “state” but includes un-state-like but equally significant actors, processes and claims to power, authority and sovereignty. In the accounts the human/divine distinction also dissolves.

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<sup>411</sup> Banerjee, “Culture/politics.”

In what follows I will explore the nature of this wider, more inclusive political space both in terms of its forms and textures as well as in the ways in which sovereign power and authority are eventually shaped. In the statist records, administrative structures, functionaries and processes comprise the wherewithal for the exercise of power and authority by the raja in “state.” In these accounts the exercise of power and authority depends on a variety of factors ranging from the ability to begin settlement and cultivation, sustain and nurture life, work out the proper arrangement of forces and cleanse gods and other forces of harm and corruption but also skills in making rain, controlling the flows of rivers, taming and hunting wild beasts, and music and dance. We are taken away from the predictable routines of administrative management that comprise the “stuff” of state records into the unpredictable terrain of hills, forests and rivers, and into the rough and tumble of the forces and rhythms of life itself. The rational registers of the “state” where people are reduced to numbers and rules sit side by side with the intangible, affective registers of life where the actors come alive in majestic adventures.

Understandably then, in these accounts, the configurations of power, authority and sovereignty are not already given, closed off in the person of the raja and the myth of the “state,” but are fashioned through engagements between ancestral and non-ancestral gods and other forces, their keepers and peoples, and the raja. In the last chapter, we have discussed how the power and authority of the forces of the *bhum* (both ancestral and non-ancestral), various notables of the *bhumkal* and the raja are closely tied to their positions and roles in the balance of the *bhum*, necessary for the sustenance of the life of the *bhumkal*. In these accounts, the raja’s claims to sovereign power and authority get drawn out into the requirements of this balance and entangled with other regimes of power

centered on the gods, their keepers and peoples. The resulting regimes are determined by a test of the strength of the competing forces and the balance of power shaped in the contest. The raja is in these accounts hardly the sovereign of his self-description, with complete, absolute, all-encompassing power, but an actor whose claims to sovereignty are challenged, contested, divided and shared.

Most importantly, power, authority and sovereignty appear in these popular accounts, which make for a new and distinct archive of sovereignty, on terms very different from those of statist archives fashioned by the interests, processes and functionaries of the colonial-princely regime. As noted in the fourth chapter, one might argue that in these accounts agency is often given to gods and spirits rather than to people. Apart from the fact that, as discussed in the last chapter, the *bhumkal* has a leverage on its gods, especially its ancestors, and is therefore agential in the here-and-now, mundane sense of the term, it is also important to mark the agency of the people as narrators in constructing their own world, on terms in which the historical conception of the agent itself gets unsettled. It is the conceit of the modern, unified subject-agent, and his representational protocols, which actually lies at the heart of the othering of peoples as “primitive.” It is in their counter-conceptions of polity as inclusive of what is dismissed as “pre-political” and sovereignty as not vested in the “state” but as divided and shared that the *anga dev* accounts pose a radical critique of historical-modernist paradigms and the politics that they advance.

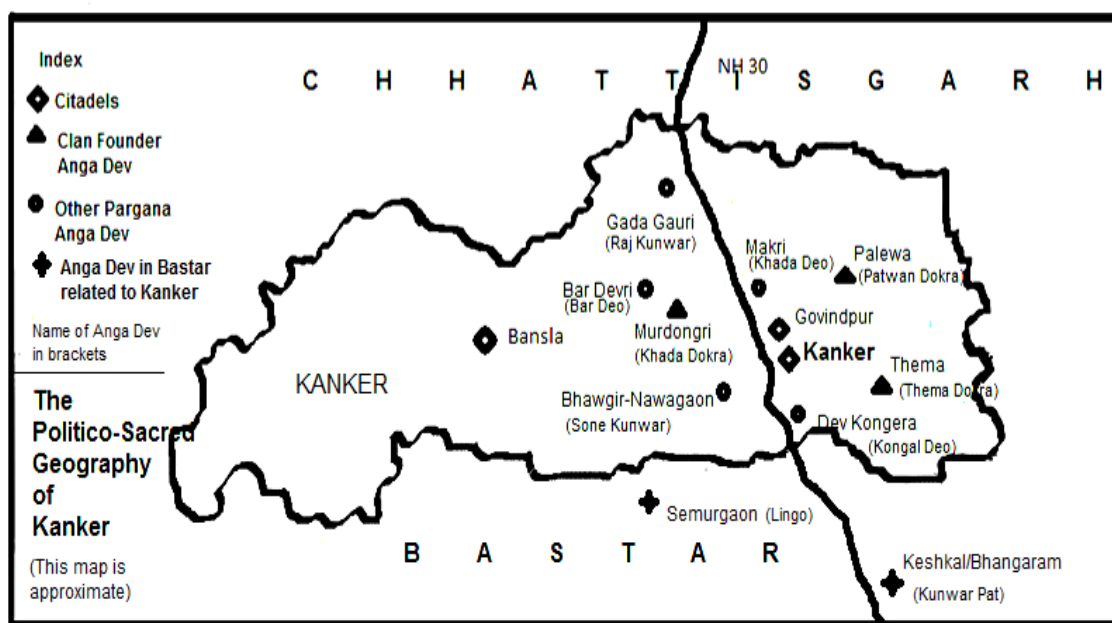
The *anga dev* accounts I present here could have been classified and organized in several different ways. I could have divided them in terms of particular constellations of deities – ancestral, non-ancestral – to which the accounts are connected, or even

chronologically, according to the reigns of the rajas. Keeping to constellations of deities was not always possible due to the interconnected nature of their regimes as discussed in the last chapter. A chronological approach appeared to be self-defeating as ancestors of different times, and rajas as well, were often conflated into one entity.

Since my primary aim is to see how the raja's sovereign claims get challenged and reworked, I have divided the accounts largely in terms of the territorial proximity/distance of their location from the citadel of the raja. If the raja's sovereign claims were in the first instance mapped spatially through the idea of sovereignty over all aspects of life in a clearly demarcated territory, I begin with accounts of the citadel itself and progressively move out towards accounts situated on the limits of this territory, showing throughout the ways in which these accounts unsettle the sovereign-territorial quite fundamentally. This also allows me to argue for the centrality of the *anga dev pargana* – territories organized on the principle of the *anga dev* cosmology – in the geography of power in Kanker.

In what follows, I first discuss the accounts of the citadel of the raja in Kanker, showing how in the very seat of the raja's power, his sovereign claims get challenged. I then look at two previous citadels of the raja, Bansla and Govindpur, where too the idea of the raja's power appears under contestation. Following this are two sections that deal with accounts about the *anga dev pargana*: one about the *anga dev* who are seen as clan founders and the other about the *anga dev* who are not clan-founders. The focus on the *anga dev pargana* allows us to see how large areas in Kanker work with the idea of two rajas – the raja of Kanker *and* the *anga dev* – instead of one, severely dividing the raja of Kanker's sovereign claims. I then explore regimes of power and authority that go beyond

the territorial confines of Kanker and intersect with those of Bastar, effectively escaping both. Throughout these discussions one needs to bear in mind the problems of working with any notion of territory let alone fixed territory because the *anga dev* cosmology, despite the idea of the *bhum*, is territorial only in a limited sense and refers to powers and relations of power that can often not be captured in the idea of territory. The map below marks the key sites in the politico-sacred geography of Kanker where the accounts discussed in this chapter are located.



Map 3. The Politico-Sacred Geography of Kanker

Throughout this discussion, I also chart the ways in which the movement of various groups, whether Gond clans, castes, religious or linguistic communities, plays out in relation to the varied regimes of power. I mark the ways in which new groups assert themselves, are engaged with and then incorporated into existing regimes through test of strength and exchange of sovereign symbols. In the case of the distinction between

Chhattisgarhi and Gondi speaking groups, I note the perceptions and relationships between them. In the context of the dispersal of Gond clans, I attend to the ways in which Gond traditions transform and take on local orientations. I also mark cases where the raja was critical in resolving disputes within clans. All through, I lay out the settings in which these accounts were given to me and the particular ways in which my interlocutors apprehended my position as the raja.

### **The Raja and his Citadel in Kanker**

It is in the accounts about the raja's citadels that one would expect to find the strongest depictions of the raja's sovereign power and authority. Surprisingly, in these accounts, the sovereign claims of the raja get considerably muddled: here the regime of the raja is limited, pushed back by and tied into other regimes of power and authority centered on gods, their keepers and peoples, and other forces of the *bhum*. Far from being the unquestioned seat of the sovereign raja, the citadel appears besieged, penetrated from all sides by powerful forces, with the raja caught in the middle. In some accounts, the idea of the citadel is so fundamentally reworked that the raja is effectively banished from the font of power in the citadel, his access to it open only through myriad negotiations. In the light of these constructions, the sovereign claims of the raja ring hollow. In the proper arrangement of the forces of the *bhum*, the raja occupies only one of the several foci of power between whom a balance is effected.

Power and authority in these accounts depend on the ability of the forces to look to the well being of the people, to offer them nurture and sustenance, to protect them from illness and harm, to counteract those forces that bring trouble and to contribute to the balance of the *bhum*. The power of the raja, sometimes marked by his ability to



impose brutal punishment, gets severely constrained by its inability to transgress the logic of the cosmological balance.

Let me begin by returning to the accounts of the politico-sacred geography of the *madai* in the town of Kanker, the capital of the raja of Kanker. In the introduction, I pointed out that the *madai* (annual fair) was the “marriage” or joining of life-forces, the gods and raja included, that secured the realm symbolically by circumambulating the *madai bhata* (fair ground) located under the watchful eyes of the Garhiya Deo, the god-treasurer of the raja’s hill fort, the Garhiya Pahar. This was one account of the *madai* given to me by the *gaita* of the royal *anga dev*.<sup>412</sup>

This account is one of several sets of stories about the Qila Dongri/Garhiya Pahar, the hills that tower sharply over the town of Kanker, and constitute the most spectacular point in its geography. With their bare, blue-grey stones and jagged profile, they appear both solemn and intimidating. The River Dudh, which divides the town into two, cradles the foot of these hills where the hills are at their highest. The oldest part of the Kanker town, Raja Para, or literally “raja’s neighborhood,” is nestled at this juncture, and huddles closely between the slope of the hills and the waters of the river below. The town of Kanker, if we exclude a late urbanization along the National Highway 30, is a collection of villages that are called *para* (neighborhood). Visible from all parts of the town, and from large distances around it, the Garhiya Pahar is the town’s most important landmark. At the highest point of the Garhiya Pahar, reached by a flight of steps, are the shrines of several gods and goddesses and a small pond that is full of water every year. Pilgrims climb the Garhiya Pahar every day, as do occasional adventurers who go up for the breath-taking view of the valley, river and town below.

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<sup>412</sup> Conversations with Sakha Ram Patel, January 2011 and 2012, Kanker.

The Garhiya Pahar, as is evident from its importance for the *madai*, forms a significant part of the historical-religious imaginary of the people of the town and the territories of the former princely state of Kanker. The term Garhiya Pahar means “the hill with the fort” from *garh* or fort and *pahar* or hill. One set of popular accounts link the remains of a mud-stone fort at the top, dated by Valyani and Sahasi’s history of Kanker to the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>413</sup> but probably a much later construction,<sup>414</sup> and therefore the Garhiya Pahar itself, to the power of the raja. Most of these accounts, which have found their way into Valyani and Sahasi’s history of Kanker, mark the Garhiya Pahar as the citadels of the rajas of Kanker from the time of the Kandra dynasty (1344-1397).<sup>415</sup>

According to this history, whereas the Mechka hills of Sihawa, the catchment of the River Mahanadi, formed the citadel of the Somvanshi dynasty (1145-1344)<sup>416</sup> before the Kandra dynasty, from the time of the latter dynasty onwards, the Garhiya Pahar became an alternate citadel until Tanu Deo (1425-1461) of the last Chandravanshi dynasty finally fixed his capital in Kanker.<sup>417</sup> From Darro’s accounts and those of the Kanker *siyan* in general, and the remains of a fort, we know of another citadel of the Kandra dynasty at Bansla in the northern part of Kanker but from the period of Tanu Deo, it is the Garhiya Pahar which appears as the main seat and symbol of the kingdom of Kanker. Though from the colonial period onwards the rajas of Kanker have lived in

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<sup>413</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 78.

<sup>414</sup> Agnew, P. Vans, *A Report on the Subah or Province of Chhattisgarh, Written in 1820 AD* (Nagpur: Govt. Press, 1922). Agnew mentions the remains of a fort-like construction during his visit to Kanker in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>415</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 77-80.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 72-77.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

palaces more and more distant from the Garhiya Pahar,<sup>418</sup> the perceptions of the Garhiya Pahar as the citadel of the raja is connected as much to them as to their pre-colonial predecessors.

In the accounts where it is recognized as the citadel of the raja, the Garhiya Pahar represents the might of the raja, the point from where the kingdom was controlled. Whoever controlled this fort, it is said, controlled all of Kanker. It was difficult to besiege and it reminded the people all the time that the raja was in attendance. A powerful and chilling example of this can be seen in the popular account that criminals were thrown off or hung on the tallest cliff of the Garhiya Pahar in full view of the people. Prakash Bhandari, the *gaita* of Garhiya Deo, mentioned in the last chapter, told me that his family had been appointed by the raja to look after his treasury, or *bhandar* (from whence the name Bhandari), which also included all the gods and goddesses of the realm that the raja had collected in his fort.<sup>419</sup> Garhiya Deo was the god of the treasury and the Bhandari family was his *gaita*. In these accounts the raja emerges as sovereign over land, people and gods, gazing down from his hill perch at his kingdom with full authority.

Bhandari himself however gave other accounts, recalled in one form or another by numerous other *siyan* in the town of Kanker and the villages, which reworked the sovereign position of the raja in the Garhiya Pahar dramatically. Bhandari spoke of how the Garhiya Pahar was *bhum* and *prakriti* (nature), the point from which the world had

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<sup>418</sup> In 1850, the palace in Raja Para, the earliest known and extant palace in Kanker, was the residence of the raja. Komal Deo (1904-25) built a new palace across the river, at quite some distance from the Garhiya Pahar. After 1925 till 1935, for most of which period the ruler was a minor, the British resident lived in the newly constructed Radhaniwas Bagicha that was even further away from the Garhiya Pahar. When Bhanu Deo was given ruling powers in 1943, he started living in Radhaniwas Bagicha. The last ruler of Kanker, he did not live in any other palace.

<sup>419</sup> Conversation with Prakash Bhandari, 05.19.12, Kanker.

emerged. This story parallels some Gond legends of origin from the abode of Mahadeo in the Kailash Mountains.<sup>420</sup> The *bhumkal* and the raja were the children of *bhum* and thus of the Garhiya Pahar. But first of all and mainly, it was the place of gods.

Bhandari gave me a long account of all the gods that resided in the Garhiya Pahar and their place in the scheme of the cosmos so that Garhiya Pahar became, in this account, the central cosmic space of Kanker. Midway through the list Bhandari stopped and wondered whether it would not be wrong of him to discuss the precise place and arrangement of gods in the Garhiya Pahar; unless this arrangement was kept a secret, harmful forces might tie the gods up and bring ruin upon the people. Then, muttering to himself for a while, he concluded that it was alright to reveal this secret to the raja because after all the gods were *rajwade dev* (gods of the kingdom recognized by the raja). He said that the *siyan* knew of the secret because their ancestors had passed it down to them, and if I thought carefully, I would realize that I knew it too, almost instinctively. It was clear however that Bhandari felt powerful in being able to tell me, the raja, about the gods on the Garhiya Pahar, as if in some ways he was participating in re-forging a very important link that had snapped.

Following is an account of the proper arrangement of gods on the Garhiya Pahar, constituting the balance of the *bhum*, given to me by Bhandari. I will withhold some of the information in order not to reveal the full arrangement. The most important god is the Garhiya Deo, the god of the fort, who guards the fort within which the gods have their *samrajya* (empire, kingdom). He is in the form of a silver image and sits on a wooden throne lodged in a shallow cave just outside the *sinhdwar* or the main ceremonial entrance of the fort. By his side at the entrance of the fort is his helper, Mokhla Majhi, in

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<sup>420</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 225-265.

the form of an axe and metal chain, charged with traveling down the Garhiya Pahar in place of Garhiya Deo (who can not leave his place in the fort) to meet the *bhumkal* when required. Immediately after entering the fort at the gate are the places of Maoli Devi, in the form of a stone idol, and then Shakti Devi, in the form of a small platform underneath which are her footprints, both mother goddesses. Further into the fort, there is a place for Mahadeo, in the form of a *linga* (a common idol of Mahadeo/Shiva). Following Mahadeo is Guru Betal, the warrior god, sculpted into a stone in the form of a male warrior carrying arms. Bhandari said that it was Guru Betal's duty to protect the world. There is also a place for the Panchdev, the ancestral deity of the *bhumkal* of the town of Kanker, representing its first settlers and oldest residents, who is in the form of a wooden pillar.

In the central part of the fort there is a place for the seven Shitala sisters, who appear in the form of a stone that is *bhumiphod* (that which has broken out of the earth). In a small cave next to Shitala is a pot with a conch, the Gosain Devi, who is responsible for *palan-poshan* (nurture). By her side, in the form of a stone is Raja Rao Deo, the god of wild beats, who keeps them in control. In front of the Shitala, again in the form of a stone, is Langur Deo, a simian god, often likened to Hanuman, a popular deity connected with the epic *Ramayana*. Kari Deo, who is in the form of a large rock, deals with harmful forces. In a similar form, Kachna Guruva Deo is responsible for cleaning the *kachada* (trash) that dirties the gods and the Garhiya Pahar. There is also a Doctor Deo, and Telin Mata, two gods who are central at the Bhangaram complex in Keshkal, about whom I shall say more later. The Garhiya Pahar, in Bhandari's account, appears as the central place where the various forces of the *bhum* are represented and together forge a regime of checks and balances critical for the life of the *bhumkal*.

The only royal figures in this community of deities on the Garhiya Pahar are the sisters Sonai and Rupai Devi, *jal kaina*, who live in the pond. The story of the sisters is commonly known to children in Kanker. Sonai and Rupai were daughters of the raja who climbed the hill to play at the place of gods at the top of the hill. Sitting down to play on the hilltop, they began to dig out and make small heaps of the clay. Before they realized it, they had dug so deep that water welled up and drowned them. The water body on the hilltop is thus called the Sonai-Rupai *talaab* (pond). There is a tradition, mentioned earlier, according to which members of the raja's family don't climb the hill. If the raja himself were to do so, he would be expected to sacrifice a goat at each step. Effectively therefore, the raja is barred from the Garhiya Pahar. What in some popular traditions is the place of the raja, the gods being under his sway, in the counter tradition becomes the place of gods and other forces of the *bhum* to which the raja has only a negotiated and difficult access.

Bhandari's family claims to have been the *gaita* of the Garhiya Pahar for a very long time. Though Bhandari sometimes spoke of being appointed by the raja as mentioned earlier, at other times he had a different view. An account about his family will illustrate this. At some point in the past, the enemies of the Bhandari family accused it of working against the raja. Incensed, the raja had the Bhandari *gaita's* body smashed with stone and thrown into the river. The *gaita* escaped drowning and his body was healed. His family and he fled into hiding and bided their time. Meanwhile, the raja discovered that the *gaita* had survived and came to suffer from the fear that he would be killed by a person of the Bhandari family whom he had persecuted. Fearful that he might

meet his death at the hands of a Bhandari, he sent his soldiers to hunt out and kill all Bhandari children.

One Bhandari child survived the massacre. He was protected by Maoli, disguised as a poor woman, who hid him behind a bush. Time passed and the raja was threatened by his internal and external adversaries. Not knowing where to go, he took refuge in the Garhiya Pahar where the surviving Bhandari offered him the protection of his deities. The raja realized his mistake and recognized the Bhandari family's position as the *gaita* of the Garhiya Pahar. In this account, the *gaita* derives his position from being the keeper of gods, cannot be displaced by the raja who himself is given the sanctuary of gods and acknowledges the power of the god-*gaita* complex.

Lately, Bhandari and the *siyan* of Kanker have been very upset with a recent development that plays out, in a way, the old conflict for the control of the Garhiya Pahar. Seven years ago, few of the most influential local politicians of the Congress Party mooted the idea of building a temple to Devi Kankeshwari on the Garhiya Pahar. Initially meant to further the political clout of these leaders, especially since they were facing criticism from within his party as well as the opposition, this initiative has grown since. There is now a temple on the Garhiya Pahar dedicated to Kankeshwari, a goddess heard of for the first time in this initiative, but promoted, as is obvious from her name, as the goddess of Kanker; and a corpus of money has been sanctioned by the local, state and central levels of governments to hold a *Garhiya Mahotsava* or "Grand Festival of Garhiya" comprising cultural programs during Dasehra.

Apart from causing environmental harm by drawing unsustainably large crowds for the duration of the festival into the small area on the hill top, the Kankeshwari

initiative has led to tension between the *siyan* of the older shrines of the Garhiya Pahar and the organizers of the festival over questions of tradition and ownership of the sacred land on the hill. Without asking me, my name as raja of Kanker has been appropriated as one of the patrons of the festival by the organizers to give it wider, historical legitimacy. In a meeting at the palace, where the *siyan* of the town discussed the problems being caused by this new initiative, one of them expressed the issue in terms of a question of the balance of power between the forces of the *bhum*, and the thus the proper arrangements of gods/forces: “Who is this new god (Kankeshwari)? Where has she come from? Has she been put to the test?” (*Ae har kaun devi hai? Ae har kahan se aaye hai? Ka okar jaanch hois he ka?*). The struggle for the citadel continues in various guises to this day.

The contest over the citadel and the reworked hierarchy of sovereignty is best illustrated in the symbolism of the tradition of Holi in Kanker. The festival of Holi begins with the lighting of a pyre, representing the death of evil, the night before. In Kanker, the first pyre is lit on top of Garhiya Pahar. Once the light from the fire at the top of the hill is sighted in the town, worship begins at the palace as a preliminary to lighting a pyre there. Fire from the pyre at Garhiya Pahar is then brought to light the pyre at the palace. Finally, fire from the palace pyre is distributed to various neighborhoods of the town for their own pyres. In this hierarchy, the raja submits to the superior position of the forces of the *bhum* represented by the deities of the Garhiya Pahar.

According to Bhandari and other *siyan*, the gods have over time climbed down from the Garhiya Pahar and made their home among the *bhumkal*, spreading their regimes throughout the *bhum*. Indeed, most of the deities with their places on the hilltop



have their own separate shrine in other areas of the town and the villages of Kanker. In the preceding chapter, I discussed the rather elaborate practices of the seven Shitala sisters in the town of Kanker. Their shrine, located along the borders of the town, in Mahurband Para, Barde Bhata, Annapurna Para, Shitala Para, Tikrapara and Govindpur, make a protective ring around it. One of the Shitala temples houses Bade Pat Deo, the elder of the two royal *anga dev*.

Similarly, the goddess Shakti has her shrine in the Sinhwahini temple in Raja Para, where the oldest extant palace of the raja of Kanker is located, Sinhwahini being another name for Shakti. Maoli Devi takes her place at the bottom of the Garhiya Pahar at Gaddi Maoli, a place where, in her presence, the raja has traditionally been crowned. The Panchdev, the *bhumihar dev* of Kanker, has his shrine located on the foot of the Garhiya Pahar in Raja Para which is looked after by a family of Dehari Gonds who claim to be one of the oldest families of the town. Mokhla Majhi, Garhiya Deo's helper, has his own shrine close to one of Shitala's in Annapurna Para, a neighborhood in the southeastern part of Kanker. He is looked after by 60-year old Budhram Salam, according to whom Mokhla Majhi, a *bhumihar* of the Salam Gonds, came down from the Garhiya Pahar and established his *raj-pat* (rule) at the site of the shrine.<sup>421</sup>

In most of these shrines, the raja is given access only through the fulfillment of certain conditions. The accounts of the Bade and Chhote Kankalin Devi, part of the repertory of the mother goddess figure, demonstrates the negotiated and restricted access of the raja into sacred spaces and regimes of the citadel itself, as was the case in the account of the Garhiya Pahar mentioned earlier. I have discussed the centrality of the

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<sup>421</sup> Conversation with Budhram Salam, 04.11.12, Kanker.

shrine of the Chhote Kankalin Devi to *madai bhata* in the first chapter. This shrine, along with Garhiya Pahar, forms the boundary of the *madai bhata*, and signifies a permanent securing of the *madai* between Garhiya Deo and Kankalin. Very popular (the *gaita* proudly claimed that he had received donations from abroad as well) and now under the management of the district administration, the shrine of Chhote Kankalin has a large signboard outside which says *Riyasat Kalin Mandir* or a “Temple from the time of the Princely State.”

The *gaita* of the shrine is Abhishek, a 30-year old man from the Sonar caste. He was very excited about my visit and gave me a full tour of the shrine and its attendant structures. He told me that his father was not keeping well and that is why he had had to step in to look after the shrine. He complained about the district administration’s lack of interest in the shrine and its management and wondered if I could intervene on his behalf to resolve the many problems the shrine was facing including the lack of proper drainage and unauthorized settlements in the *madai bhata*. Here is Abhishek’s account of the Sonar people, Kankalin and the raja that shows the restrictions to which the raja is subjected even in his own citadel.<sup>422</sup>

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century several Sonar families were invited to Kanker from Lucknow by the raja of Kanker to make ornaments of gold for the kingdom. An ancestor of Abhishek’s family had a vision of Kankalin who asked him to excavate her from the ground and worship her. When the ancestor told this to the raja, he was asked to mind his own business and not meddle in matters best left to the raja. The ancestor however continued to insist that the raja listen to him. Persuaded at last but still angry, the raja

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<sup>422</sup> Conversation with Abhishek Soni, 04.07.12, Kanker.

decided to excavate the ground pointed out by the ancestor. To the raja's consternation, the goddess revealed herself to be buried there.

The raja decided to take her away but the goddess refused to move. The raja was eventually forced to build a shrine for the goddess at the place of her emergence and to accept the Sonar ancestor as her *gaita*. Since then the goddess has not left her place, not even on the invitation of the raja, who has had to reconcile himself to dealing with her attendant, Kaal Bhairav, another form of Mahadeo. The raja's attempt to gain access to her through a *sirha* also failed because no one could call the deity out of her body into his head without having his head shattered into a thousand pieces. When the raja tried to do so, he had to find a person who was resigned to dying and had the capacity to tempt the goddess to enter his head. After trying for a couple of times the raja gave up. When the raja invited Kaal Bhairav to attend the Dasehra worship at the Danteshwari temple in the palace, the invitation was accepted only on the condition that a white horse and a white goat would be offered to Kankalin. Not only is the raja severely restricted in these accounts, his attempt to control the deity, and thus her powers, are frustrated.

Many such accounts tell of similar restrictions on the power of the raja, or even censure his regime through the powers of the gods and their keepers. A popular account given to me by Lakshmi Dehari, the *gaita* of Panchdev, holds that whenever the raja was up to some mischief, a *chitwa* (leopard) or *bagh* (tiger) would descend from the Garhiya Pahar and roar a warning.<sup>423</sup> The animal would often disturb the arrangements of the shrines in the Kanker town, drawing attention to the god's displeasure at the raja's activities and demanding propitiation from him. In this account, the leopard/tiger appears

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<sup>423</sup> Conversations with Lakshmi Dehari, 04.18.12, Raja Para, Kanker

as a force of the *bhum* in its own right, even if descending from the Garhiya Pahar, one that expresses its authority over the raja in no uncertain terms.

Like the Panchdev and Mokhla Majhi, many *bhumihar dev* in the villages of Kanker are understood to have descended from Garhiya Pahar and made their villages in different parts of the kingdom. In Thelkabod, Makhan Matiara spoke of how he had often seen Garhiya Devi (here Garhiya Deo is represented as female), Shitala Devi and *thakur dai* (a form of *bhumihar dev*) walk around his village in the evenings. In Gada Gauri, the Kange Gond *bhumihar* is known to have lived in Garhiya Pahar before moving to make his own village quite far away from it.

In connecting their past to the Garhiya Pahar, various Gond clans and Kanker villages derive direct and independent legitimacy from the *bhum* and its forces, not necessarily mediated by the raja.<sup>424</sup> In speaking of the descent of the gods and other forces from the Garhiya Pahar into the town of Kanker and the villages beyond, popular oral accounts suggest resistance to and even penetration of the realm of the raja by godly regimes of power. In this way, the various sections of the *bhumkal* claim their own spaces centered on their gods within as well as against the kingdom of the raja where the access of the raja himself is negotiated and restricted.

In these accounts the raja's citadel is not a place of his unquestioned sovereignty, but one in which his power and authority get severely curtailed. What emerges instead is a contested space where the raja's regime lies intertwined with and therefore limited by

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<sup>424</sup> Though many of these local realms trace their foundation to a clan or caste initiative, they show considerable transferability of the position of the *gaita* between clans and castes, demonstrating their eventually broad and mixed constituency which we have seen as being typical in Kanker. For example, the *gaita* of Bade Shitala was first a Dhobi, then a Hidco Gond and now a Pradhan Gond. The Panchdev was first looked after by the Kumhars and now by the Dehari Gonds.

other regimes of gods, their keepers and peoples and other forces of the *bhum*. The raja's self-proclaimed position at the summit in the hierarchy of sovereign power and authority gets displaced quite definitely; and the raja has to negotiate himself back into the configuration of power with a much-diminished stature.

### **Other Citadels in Bansla and Govindpur**

While discussing the citadel of the raja, the case of Bansla needs special mention. Although Bansla is a former citadel of the raja of Kanker, the accounts from there show a particularly strong construction of resistance to the regime of the raja. In fact they do so by taking away one of his citadels and setting it up as the locus of a separate center of power based on the raja's lineage deity. In a way, one of the raja's sources of power is turned on him. In contrast, in Govindpur, a citadel is given to the raja by the people. In exchange they seek an independent securing of their *bhum*, outside the raja's participation. In both cases, whether a citadel is taken from or gifted to the raja, his sovereign claim is considerably compromised.

Though the town of Kanker acquired pre-eminence in the kingdom from the Kandra dynasty onwards, Bansla, one of the older capitals, continued to occupy an important place within the kingdom, as the central place of a fiercely independent *pargana* of 84 villages collected around memories of a locally oriented polity. The account of Bansla, given to me by Mansai Darro and the *siyan* of Bansla, begins with the Kandra dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>425</sup> With the decline of the rule of the Somvanshi dynasty in early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Dharam Deo of the Kandra dynasty, of the Nahar/Bansod Gond clan, seized the capital Sihawa and became the ruler of Kanker. He was from the

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<sup>425</sup> Conversation with Mansai Darro and other *siyan* of Bansla, 12.05.11, Kanker.

Bansla region, an area of considerable population of Nahars, or bamboo growers. He was later ousted from Sihawa and retreated to the town of Kanker.

Bansla, as the clan center of the Nahars, remained a significant ritual place for the raja, where apart from the clan gods Chhote and Bade Pat Deo, there was also a temple of the family deity of the Kandra dynasty, Danteshwari. While the Dehari Gonds looked after the royal *anga dev*, the Darro Gonds were given responsibility for Danteshwari. When the Kandra dynasty died out after a short period of rule towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the Chandravanshi dynasty took over power in Sihawa-Kanker, Bansla lost some of its significance. In the period of Narharideo, Chhote and Bade Pat Deo found their way to the town of Kanker and began to reside with the Chandravanshi raja.

In exchange for the raja keeping Chhote and Bade Pat Deo, the *bhumkal* of Bansla kept Danteshwari who, following a supra-dynastic tradition, remained the family deity of the ruling family. In this story, the exchange of cosmologically critical deities between the *bhumkal* of Bansla and the raja of Kanker marks a balance of power between a *pargana* and the center. Bansla has its own fort with a full set of *bhum* deities including the Shitala and the Maoli Devi. That Bansla continues to style itself as a citadel suggests the raja's failure to control and center the focus of the kingdom on himself and his citadel alone. There is here a division and sharing of sovereignty.

Bansla's independent orientation can also be seen in the following instance. The family of Darro claims the right of being the *gaita* of Danteshwari in Bansla, a right derived out of memories of its special ties with the deity, independent of the raja's appointment even though the family manages the most important temple of the lineage

deity of the royal family.<sup>426</sup> Darro's account was given to me in the backdrop of the court case in which, as mentioned in the introduction, a group of Dehari *siyan* has sued the raja's family for the return of Chhote Pat. Though Darro's group, comprising most of the *siyan* of Bansla, is opposed to the Dehari claim on Chhote Pat, Darro's account could hardly be described as accepting the raja's unquestioned authority.

Darro claimed his ancestry back to the village of Madpa in the Narainpur area of Bastar. Long ago, when they were living in Madpa, Darro's ancestors, the couple Sattu and Sonbai, were expecting their first child who, according to divine signs, was predicted to be a leader in his *bhumkal*. Jealous of this fact, Sattu's brothers and sisters-in-law accused Sonbai of being a witch. The couple fled towards Kanker where the Kalar *malguzar* of Sonekhar in the Bansla *pargana* gave them refuge. After the birth of their son Vijja, the fortune of Sattu and Sonbai changed. When the Kalar *malguzar*, who according to the tradition of his caste also produced liquor, found that he did not have enough money to pay the raja's liquor tax, a large amount of money was found lying around the child Vijja. Grateful for their help, the Kalar gave Vijja and his family the *malguzari* of seven villages of Ghotia.

When Vijja had grown into a young man, he and his father were visiting Bansla. At that time, the raja, who wanted to repair the temple of Danteshwari, was finding it difficult to remove the deity from her place so that repair work could begin. The raja then announced a *swayamvar* or a ceremony in which the deity would choose the person who would move her. Finding a large crowd near the temple, Vijja and his father decided to see what was going on. While standing near Danteshwari, Vijja's foot accidentally touched

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<sup>426</sup> Conversation with Mansai Darro and other *siyan* of Bansla, 12.05.11, Kanker.

the goddess, making her move. What the raja and the *siyan* had been unable to do, Vijja had accomplished effortlessly. He later managed to tame a horse that had gone out of control near the temple and rode it successfully three times around the goddess. Since then, said Darro, his family has kept the position of the *gaita*. In this account, Danteshwari is claimed for the Darro family and Bansla. Not surprisingly then, the raja in Kanker had to satisfy himself with a small Danteshwari temple in the town of Kanker, the largest and the most important shrine of the goddess in Kanker still being in Bansla.

The villages of the Bansla *pargana*, from the organization of their *anga dev* practices, appear to be the most weakly connected to the royal family in Kanker even though, through Chhote and Bade Pat, their gods have ritual primacy with the raja. As discussed earlier, a small group of people from this area has sued the royal family for the return of Chhote and Bade Pat Deo. The only story of large-scale rebellion in Kanker also comes from this area. It is commonly held and Darro and the Bansla *siyan* concurred that at the time of the Second World War, the *angrez* forced the raja to accept huge levies of money, grain and wood. This imposed an unjust burden on the *bhumkal*. Under the leadership of a few *malguzars*, Indru Kewat, Gulab Halba and Kanglu Kumhar, the *bhumkal* of Bansla refused to pay their taxes. They were captured and brought to Kanker where the raja intervened with the *diwan*, who was working on the orders of the *angrez*, to free the rebels and gave some relief to the affected.

The establishment of Chhote Pat and Bade Pat as royal *anga dev* itself suggests a compromise weighed against the raja, characteristic of the royal-Bansla relationship, which became central to the popular imagination of the raja's polity in Kanker. Recall the accounts of Darro discussed in the introduction. In the Nahar's admission of error in



injuring Chhote Pat and Narharideo's lifting of the *anga dev* out of the river, both the Nahar and Narharideo being rajas, there is a royal acknowledgement of the power of the *anga dev*, in the first instance a local ancestor. It could be argued that it is through the elevation to royal status of Chhote and Bade Pat, originally merely settler deities of the local cosmology, that the raja eventually gains access to the heart of the popular cosmos and lodges himself there.

The marriage of royal and *anga dev* cosmologies in the idea of royal *anga dev*, though seemingly settled and harmonious, has not always been smooth. That the presence of Chhote and Bade Pat in the raja's regime was often marked by awkwardness and tension, as is evident from the *igrarnama*, becomes clearer in an account given to me by Abhishek Soni.<sup>427</sup> According to Soni, once a posse of policemen who were training under the *angrez* stopped Chhote Pat and Bade Pat on their way to the shrine of Chhote Kankalin. The policemen laughed at the *anga dev* and their bearers and wondered what manner of creature the *anga dev* was, half-man, half-wood, and how peculiarly it walked. Incensed, the *anga dev* challenged the policemen to carry them on their shoulders. Once the policeman had lifted the *anga dev*, the gods drove them into the pond nearby, and pressed them down into the water and raised a tide until the policemen began to drown. Terrified and repentant, the policemen begged for mercy and were forgiven and released by the *anga dev*. Here, one aspect of the raja's regime (the *anga dev*) forces acknowledgement from the imperious, contemptuous other half (the modern apparatus of rule).

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<sup>427</sup> Conversation with Abhishek Soni, 04.07.12, Kanker.

If in Bansla, the exchange of deities allows for the maintenance of a second, people's citadel in defiance of the raja's own, in Govindpur, on the outskirts of Kanker, another citadel of the raja becomes possible through a gift of land by the people. Valyani and Sahasi's history of Kanker holds that Komal Deo settled Govindpur in the name of his daughter Govindkumari.<sup>428</sup> Komal Deo temporarily shifted his capital to Govindpur, built a temple to Mahadeo and held his court there.<sup>429</sup> Makhan Matiara, mentioned in the last chapter, of the Dhimar *malguzari* family of Thelkabod, which is the *para* that connects the town of Kanker to Govindpur, had a somewhat different account to give.<sup>430</sup> According to him, when the Dhimar's settled in Thelkabod in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thelkabod and Govindpur were both untamed wilderness. There was a small *basti* (settlement) of Salam Gonds, Kumhars and Sahus in Thelkabod. The land was full of bush, there was a large marsh and habitation was difficult. The Dhimars cleared the marsh, created a clear pond and, along with the other residents of the village, cut down the bush to open up more land for cultivation. In time, Thelkabod became a prosperous village.

Following these developments, the Matiara ancestor Ujjiar Singh became one of Komal Deo's *jamadar*, collected revenue for the raja's court from Thelkabod and was asked to expand cultivation beyond Thelkabod. One day Komal Deo came to visit Ujjiar Singh and asked him for some of the newly settled and cultivated land to make a capital for the kingdom. The Dhimars then gave him land that was named Govindpur after the

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<sup>428</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 132.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Conversation with Makhan Matiara, 06.09.12, Thelkabod.

name of the rajas's daughter. Thelkabod and Govindpur wanted to have their own *madai* separately from Kanker. Komal Deo agreed to this and asked for Chhote and Bade Pat to be allowed to attend this *madai*. The exchange of land and ritual between the raja and the *bhumkal* in Matiara's account once again demonstrates the negotiated nature of the raja's regime and the working out and distribution of sovereignty among competing forces. It also establishes the people's first right over the *bhum* and constructs the raja as enjoying its fruits only on their largesse.

### **Clan Founders as Raja**

Let me now turn to accounts in which the *anga dev* have their own *raj-pat* (kingly rule) parallel to and in negotiation with the regime of the raja of Kanker. In these accounts, the territorial unit of the *pargana* is not constructed as a territory conceived of and applied by the raja's administration but as an area that takes shape around the memory of the balance of the forces of the *bhum* achieved under the ancestors. The imperative under which an *anga dev pargana* is organized is not the raja's administrative control of territory and people but the smooth conduct of the peoples' life under the regime of the ancestral and non-ancestral forces of the *bhum* in which the *bhumkal* participates.

In these accounts the raja's efforts to subjugate and extend his sway over the *pargana* are often frustrated and he is forced to accept the *raj-pat* of the *anga dev* and associated forces. The regime of sovereign power and authority between the raja and the gods is worked out through a testing of strengths, the acknowledgement of each other's powers and through arrangements where these powers are balanced and held in check. Elements of reciprocity and partnership often characterize these negotiations, as do

competition, hostility and conflict. The ability to control aspects of the land and its rhythms – movement of pack animals, flow of rivers, hunting of animals – becomes the constituent of power; and rivers and forests the terrain where the struggle for sovereignty takes shape. I will first look at *anga dev pargana* where the *anga dev* are remembered as clan founders.

The system of *pargana anga dev*, the highest of the deified Gond ancestors, is to a great extent based on the memory of the origin of the Gonds. We must remember here however that the influence of *anga dev* who have specific clan-related significance goes beyond their clan and tribe. While each Gond *siyan* in Kanker is capable of giving a different account of the origin of the Gonds, almost all of them narrate that at the beginning of the world, the first Gond man and woman had seven sons. In time, these sons spread out into different parts of the world and gave birth to different clans (gotra or lineage). In many versions, the parents of the seven brothers are referred to as Mahadeo and Parvati. Many of the *pargana anga dev* in Kanker are identified as one of these seven brothers or their sons.

It is difficult to find a standard list of the seven brothers. In Palewa, about 30 kms. north-east of the town of Kanker, at the shrine of Patwan Dokra *anga dev*, the *anga dev* takes a most elaborate form of six logs and two cross-bars, representing the seven Gond brothers and a son-in-law. This is the only *anga dev* in Kanker who represents all the seven brothers in him. According to the *gaita* of Patwan Dokra, the 60-year old Ratti Ram Kunjam, the seven original Gond brothers are as follows: Deshmatra, Usi-Mudia, Patwan Dokra, Khada Mudia, Narsingh Mudia, Thema Dokra and Lingo.<sup>431</sup> This was also

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<sup>431</sup> In Gondi-Halbi, *mudia* means old man, the same as *dokra* in Chhattisgarhi.

the most common list given to me by the *siyan* in Kanker in general, though, as I will discuss later, there are notable exceptions to the idea of seven brothers and to this particular list, showing an active contestation and reworking of the dominant tradition.

The location of the original settlement of these brothers is also often uncertain. Though it is possible that most of them were in Bastar, because most clans in Kanker have memories of their original village in Bastar, at least three get located in Kanker in popular memory: Patwan Dokra in Palewa, Khada Mudia in Murdongri and Thema Dokra at Thema. While there seems to be no dispute about Thema Dokra, the *bhumkal* of the village of Honehed in Bastar claim to have the original settlement of Patwan Dokra in their village. In the case of Khada Mudia, the village of Dhanora in Bastar claims to be the *anga dev*'s original place. While Malo Mandavi, the 55-year old *gaita* of Khada Dokra, accepts their claim, he has refused to return Khada Dokra to Dhanora and in the 1990s even won a case in the local court to retain control of his charge.<sup>432</sup> I will discuss his account shortly.

Kunjam and the *siyan* I met in Palewa claimed a *pargana* of 48 villages for Patwan Dokra.<sup>433</sup> The *siyan* spoke proudly of the extent of their authority to me and welcomed me into their territory as if I, the raja, was an outsider, visiting on their invitation. Patwan Dokra's shrine is located some distance out of the village of Palewa inside a dense grove located on the side of a stream. In the middle of the grove is a clearing with the shrine of Patwan Dokra on one side. In the center of the clearing there is a small heap of stones encircled by seven wooden poles. The *siyan* told me that this central space was the court of the seven Gond *mukhia* (leaders/headmen), referring to the

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<sup>432</sup> Conversation with Malo Mandavi, 05.06.12, Murdongri.

<sup>433</sup> Conversation with Ratti Ram Kunjam and the *siyan* of Palewa, 01.24.12, Palewa.

original Gond brothers. Sometimes the term *raja* was used instead of *mukhia*. During the *jatra* of Patwan Dokra, the seven Kunjam brothers of the clan of Patwan Dokra, representing the seven Gond *mukhia*, collect in the court of the *mukhia* Patwan Dokra and propitiate him and the other gods. I found that the number seven, from the seven original Gond brothers, is the most common denomination through which the succession in the following generations and the emergence of sub-clans is expressed. In this case the idea of seven Kunjam brothers replicates the idea of the seven original Gond brothers.

Patwan Dokra secures his kingdom with the help of his sister Maoli who lives in the village of Kurna, and Hinglajin Devi, who lives in Shahwada; and together they form the *panch* of the *pargana*. Maoli has a temple devoted to her, with a seat on the side for Patwan Dokra, and her *gaita* is 50-year old Joharu Jurri, from an in-law clan of the Kunjam, Maoli being Patwan Dokra's sister. Hinglajin Devi resides in the house of the 66-year old Ujjiar Singh Thakur who is from the Kodopi Gond *malguzari* family of Shahwada. Together, Jurri, his 60-year old maternal uncle Kane Singh Kunjam and Thakur gave me an account of how the *pargana* of Patwan Dokra was secured from the *raja* of Kanker and the *raja* was made to accept the *raj-pat* of Patwan Dokra-Maoli-Hinglajin *panch*.<sup>434</sup> Once again, as in the case of the Palewa *siyan*, the *siyan* in Shahwada were keen to assert the autonomy of their authority in relation to the *raja* of Kanker. Thakur proudly showed me his ancestral swords and asked me how they compared with the ones I must have in Kanker. He asked for a photo to be taken of us sitting together, he with his swords and I with my notebook!

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<sup>434</sup> Conversation with Joharu Jurri, Kane Singh Kunjam and Ujjiar Singh Thakur, 05.21.12, Kurna and Shahwada.

The raja of Kanker Padum Deo (1839-53)<sup>435</sup> wanted to forcibly take Maoli, a powerful goddess then living in Kotela and looked after by the Sori Gonds, to his capital in the town of Kanker. The bullock-cart in which the goddess was being transferred broke down while crossing the stream outside Kurna. The raja tried very hard, brought hundreds of bullocks to drag the cart out of the water but he did not succeed. Conceding defeat, the raja agreed to leave the goddess in Kurna and even made a temple for her there. From that time, said Thakur, the frontier with the raja of Kanker was set (*sarhad bandh gaya*).

Not only did Maoli secure the *pargana*, she also forced the raja to participate in the *madai* in Kurna. Maoli told the raja that unless he came to Kurna and led the *madai* procession, the *madai* would not take place and the raja would be cursed. From that time onwards, the raja comes to Kurna for probably the largest *madai* of the *pargana* of Patwan Dokra, Maoli receives him on the Kurna bank of the stream and then the raja and Maoli jointly secure (*bihana* from *bihao* or marriage) the *madai*. In this account, frontiers are marked, obligations are fixed and regimes of power negotiated between the Palewa *panch* and the raja of Kanker. The raja's effort to bring the power of the *panch* under his power is defeated.

It will help to say something here about the *madai* outside Kanker. One tradition holds that the *madai* was instituted by the raja, was first held under the supervision of the raja in the town of Kanker and was then replicated one by one, throughout the year, in the name of the raja of Kanker, in the villages of Kanker. This account establishes the ritual centrality of the raja's capital and the raja. The Kurna account suggests otherwise. In this tradition, the *madai* appears as a locally based event. The Kurna narrators seemed to

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<sup>435</sup> Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 99.

suggest that in forcing the raja to attend the *madai* Maoli was committing the raja to the securing of the *pargana* against himself. In the full account given, they might also have been pointing out that the raja wanted to attend the *madai* at Kurna to force acknowledgement of his power but was given access only on the condition that he would respect the frontier. The *madai* is here claimed as an independent, local ritual event of significance apart from the regime of the raja. Indeed there are many *madai* in Kanker, like in Kurutola, that have no memory of a connection with the raja's *madai*. It could be argued that the greater significance and longevity of the raja's *madai* in relation to Dasehra, which is clearly a royal event first, shows the strategic elevation of a local, non-royal event for purposes of legitimacy over a royal one. It also shows the greater purchase of a people's tradition in relation to a royalist one.

In the case of Khada Dokra *anga dev*, we see how the raja of Kanker was played against the raja of Bastar to create a space that escaped the regimes of both the rajas to some degree. Khada Dokra has the position of a *pargana dev* without having the territory of a *pargana* under him. The most important clan God of the Marai Gonds, one of the seven original Gond brothers, Khada Dokra is worshipped by the Marai people all over Kanker and Bastar and has a following beyond his clan, among other Gond clans and caste peoples in the villages around Murdongri. His present residence is a relatively recent brick and cement shrine built in 1975 from a sum of money given by the then MP of Kanker, Aghan Singh Thakur, and is being constantly added to by new offerings from his devotees.

Malo Mandavi, the 60-year old *gaita* of Khada Dokra, is a very busy man. Not only is Khada Dokra visited by scores of devotees everyday, he also gets invited to *jatra*



all over Kanker. He was however keen to talk to me and to share with me the problems he faced when the *siyan* of Dhanora village in Bastar sued him for the return of the *anga dev* to Dhanora which they claimed was his original place (the following account will explain this point). Though he won the case, I got the feeling that he was suggesting that the raja's family had not been supportive of him in his fight to retain control of the *anga dev* and had reneged on a commitment made long ago. His account is as follows.<sup>436</sup>

Khada Dokra originally resided in Dhanora, Bastar, where the raja had built a shrine for him in 1916. Trouble began when the raja, who was childless but desirous of having a successor, called all the gods and goddesses of the realm and asked them to use their power to obtain an heir for him. When the gods failed, the raja, in his anger, had all the gods thrown into the mighty River Indravati. Because of his power, Khada Dokra managed to swim upstream against the current and survived. Impressed, the raja decided to give him another chance. Khada Dokra then blessed the raja and told him that he would have a child in nine months.

Still suspicious, and wanting to hold him to his promise, the raja imprisoned Khada Dokra and told him that in nine months, after the child was born, he would be free to go. Khada Dokra managed to escape from the prison and, along with his Marai people, fled to the kingdom of the raja of Kanker. The raja of Bastar sent soldiers to look for Khada Dokra but the soldiers of the raja of Kanker prevented them from entering Kanker. The raja of Kanker gave Khada Dokra refuge, accepted his *raj-pat* over the Marai but asked him to work together with the *pargana anga dev* Sone Kunwar of Bhawgir-

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<sup>436</sup> Conversation with Malo Mandavi, 05.06.12, Murdongri.

Nawagaon and Khanda Dokra of Makri. From that time onwards, the Khada Dokra has ruled a *pargana* of people rather than territory.

Malo held that this history meant that the place of Khada Dokra was in Murdongri in Kanker rather than Dhanora in Bastar. In Malo's account, Khada Dokra and his Marai clansmen escaped the control of the raja of Bastar by fleeing his territory and retained some of the sovereignty of their clan even as they were subjected to the *pargana* system of the Kanker dispensation. Malo's account also demonstrates the intricate overlapping and sharing of territorial as well as non-territorial jurisdictions between the raja of Kanker and various kinds of *pargana anga dev*. In suggesting that the raja's family had not backed him in his legal battle against the Bastar litigants, he was indirectly blaming me for not fulfilling a commitment my ancestors had made to his in the past.

The third of the seven original Gond brothers who have their first settlement in Kanker is Thema Dokra, the *pargana anga dev* of 52 villages in the Sarona area of southeast Kanker. The accounts of Thema show both partnership and conflict with the raja but eventually, the working out of joint regimes of sovereignty. The village of Thema, where the *anga dev*'s shrine is located, is about 15 kms. away from the town of Kanker, and is located on the northwestern outcrop of the thickly forested Bastar Hills. The shrine proper is in the form of a cave on the top of a hill with a rounded top, which rises like a large thumb from the forest below. Bare and bluish-black in color, the hill can be seen from very far all around. A short distance from this hill, where the path to the cave shrine meets the main road is a subsidiary shrine to which the *anga dev* is brought down at the time of *jatra* or other events. While the *anga dev* is in the form of a spear in the cave shrine, at the shrine on the side of the road he takes a clay form as a tiger-riding

old man with flowing white hair and beard. At this latter shrine, various animals including a lion and a peacock, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning, attend on him.

Two of Thema Dokra's allies securing the *pargana* with him are his brother Medha Dokra, who has his shrine in the nearby village of Lendara, and Dhutmahin Dokri, in some accounts his sister, in others his wife, whose shrine is located in the village of Anjani on the road to the town of Kanker. While Thema Dokra is almost always mentioned in the list of the seven original Gond brothers, a few *siyan* in Thema and the majority in Lendara believe that Thema has only one brother, Medha Dokra. In most places where one is told about the seven brothers, either they don't know about or do not recognize Medha Dokra as the brother of Thema. With Thema and Medha Dokra we also see how Gond clans in Kanker have often broken away from the dominant Gond origin story to create a Kanker-centered lineage network in which the raja of Kanker plays an important part.

The *gaita* of the Thema brothers are from the Poya sub-clan of the Markam Gonds. The *gaita* of Thema Dokra is Devraj Poya, a 55-year old man. Along with the *siyan* of Thema, including Nathela Yadav, Guharam Yadav, Makhan Yadav and Phul Singh Vatti, Poya told me about the relationship between the raja and the *anga dev*.<sup>437</sup> This account of Thema Dokra plays out a relationship of partnership and reciprocity between the raja of Kanker and the *anga dev* and his peoples. When the village was first settled, the people of the Uike clan, who lived in the vicinity, used to harass the *bhumkal* a lot. They would take the form of tiger and drag away people from the village. Thema Dokra took it upon himself to save the village from the tigers. He could shoot several

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<sup>437</sup> Conversation with Devraj Poya and other *siyan*, 02.28.12, Thema.

arrows at one time from his bow and so he chased the tigers away and secured the village. Later, the raja also joined him and together they rid the village of the menace of tigers.

The past menace of the man-eating tigers was a common refrain among the *siyan* in Thema and in these accounts the successful hunt of the man-eating tiger was the expression of power. The role of the raja in chasing the Uike tigers suggested both an acknowledgement of his power and the establishment of a joint rule by the raja and Thema Dokra. The *siyan* recalled that my father in the mid-1960s had shot the last man-eating tiger that terrorized the nearby village of Kumhankhar.

In my conversations with the *patel* of Lendara, elderly Chaitu Ram Sorhi, and several of his *siyan* companions including Sevak Ram Poya and Nandlal Vatti, I was given another, somewhat different, accounts of brothers Thema-Medha and the raja in which the raja is no longer a friend/partner but an opponent.<sup>438</sup> According to them it was in fact Medha Dokra who was the elder of the two brothers, and the more accomplished and knowledgeable between them. Yet from the beginning the younger brother Thema would trick the elder one and take credit for the work done. Soon, an enmity developed between the brothers who were the rajas of this area and consequently there was much conflict in the land.

News of the quarreling brothers reached the raja of Kanker and he had them imprisoned and brought in chains to his court. Angry at being treated like this, the brothers told the raja that if he thought he was more powerful than them he should try hunting a tiger in any of the 52 villages they controlled. The raja tried hunting a tiger in each of the villages but failed. Every time he shot an arrow, it would turn into water. Defeated, he acknowledged that these villages belonged to the brothers and set them free.

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<sup>438</sup> Conversation with Chaitu Ram Sorhi and other *siyan*, 02.28.12, Lendara.

From that time, the raja was able to rule in that area only if he acted through the brothers and propitiated them regularly. The *siyan* remembered that only when my grandfather and father propitiated Thema Dokra were they able to hunt successfully in the *pargana*. The raja recognized Thema and Medha Dokra's *raj-pat* over their *pargana*. As in the account of Devraj Poya, the hunting of the tiger, itself a significant force of the *bhum*, becomes the act through which the relationship between the brothers and the raja is worked out. The raja however appears as an opponent whose intervention is rejected and countered. The raja's power shapes and is shaped by that of the brothers and this negotiation determines the distribution of power and sovereignty among them.

The intervention of the raja in the conflict between the brothers also points to the role the raja is accorded in the resolution of internecine contests. The *gaita* in Lendara complained to me about the high and haughty manner of Thema towards his elder brother Medha. He also attempted to draw me into the problem between the brothers by suggesting that I should speak to Thema to resolve the issues between the brothers.

### **A Kingdom of Many Rajas**

Like Patwan Dokra, Khada Dokra and Thema Dokra *anga dev*, who are connected to the larger Gond clan system, and the Thema-Medha complex, which breaks away from it, the cases of the three brothers *anga dev*, Kongal Deo, Khada Deo and Bar Deo are illustrative of political negotiations between clan and village groups, *pargana* and the raja in shaping regimes of power and authority in Kanker. Though the raja's powers are critical in shaping these regimes, the raja too has to cede ground to the *anga dev* and their people, accept considerable autonomy for their *pargana* and even draw on the abilities of the *anga dev* to shore up his regime. If the raja appears as a co-operative force in some

instances, he is also in others a figure whose authority has to be challenged, avoided or escaped. The raja, the *anga dev* and other gods engage through tests of hunting, rainmaking, flood-taming abilities and the ability to secure each other's possessions and attributes. Through these tests of strengths, interlocking arrangements of sovereignty get fashioned where no single actor has unbridled power.

The *pargana* of these *anga dev* is made up of 12 villages each and they are referred to as *barho dev* (god of 12 villages). The shrine of Kongal Deo is located in Vyas Kongera, 10 kms. South of Kanker, off the N. H. 30. The *dev-kothar* is located some distance out from the village in a sparsely forested area at the bottom of a hill. Recently, the sitting MP of Kanker, Sohan Potai, has given Rs. 2 Lakhs<sup>439</sup> for the building of a permanent *dev-kothar*. The shrine itself is a cave on the top of a hill. Kongal Deo takes the form of a very small four-limbed *anga dev*. This is the smallest size of any *anga dev* in Kanker. The deity is so small that it resides in a cave the size of an arm's length. Attending on this *anga dev* is his son-in-law, who takes the form of a finger-sized silver axe.

Kongal Deo is the elder of three brothers and has two wives, a *bamhnin* (Brahmin woman) and a *gondin* (Gond woman). Since the first of his wives left him because he used to eat meat, Kongal Deo broke all ties with women, and cannot be seen by them. He is also reputed to be very shy otherwise too and rarely comes down from his cave residence. He has several daughters, or *kaina*, who live in the forest at the bottom of the hill. It is his son-in-law who represents him to the *bhumkal* and the raja. It is said that the

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<sup>439</sup> Rs. 200, 000.

queen Shivnandini Devi was very close to him but even she could converse with him only across nine intervening curtains.

The account that follows was given to me by a group of *siyan* from the *pargana* of Kongal Deo.<sup>440</sup> In this account we see a test of strength between the raja and the *anga dev*, a test that is won by the *anga dev*. Humbled, the raja is forced to acknowledge the superior power of the *anga dev*. The most prominent among the *siyan* with whom I conversed was the 60-year old *gaita* Malo Dehari who, as mentioned in the last chapter as well as early in this one, is from the family of the *bhumihar* of the town of Kanker that looks after the Panchdev. The other two brothers of Kongal Deo are also looked after by Dehari *gaita*.

The case of this *anga dev* is another example of how though he is a Dehari sub-clan ancestor, Kongal Deo has a cross clan and caste appeal typical of the *pargana dev* in Kanker. The *pargana bhumkal* includes people from the Yadav, Lohar, Gada, Harijan castes as well as from the Gonds and the Halba clans. Further, like in the case of Thelkabod discussed in the last chapter, there are no Dehari families in Vyas Kongera so that Malo comes all the way from Kanker to perform the required rituals for the *anga dev*.

Other *siyan* with whom I spoke at the *baithak* in the *dev-kothar* in Vyas Kongera included Roop Singh Kunjam, the 60-year old *dev majhi* of the *pargana*, 26-year old Shailendra Dehari, the nephew of Malo who also lives in Kanker but looks after the *anga dev* when his uncle cannot climb up the hill, and 30-year old Kamlesh Potai, the *adhyaksha* (president) of the newly formed *dev-samiti* (*dev-committee*) that organizes the *anga dev* events of the *pargana* in association with the local *panchayat*.

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<sup>440</sup> Conversation with Malo Dehari and the *siyan* of Dev-Kongera, 04.17.12, Dev-Kongera.

According to the *siyan*, once the raja confronted Kongal Deo when he could not find any animals for hunting in the area of the *pargana*. Kongal Deo then showed him his power when, on emerging from his cave dwelling, he shepherded hundreds of animals out from the forest and moved them about at will. Bewildered, the raja began shooting at the animals running around him with his gun, a weapon that was not known in the area before, but the bullets turned into dust. Once again, Kongal Deo demonstrated his might by allowing the raja to shoot one deer. Awe-struck and humbled, the raja propitiated the *anga dev* and subsequently hunted only with the *anga dev*'s permission and along with the *siyan*, to whom he gifted guns.

Many of the *siyan* produced old guns given to them by Komal Deo and Bhanu Deo, and remembered particular episodes of hunting with the raja. They also recalled that the devotion of Narharideo to the *anga dev* was so great that when the time came to make new clothes for the deity, the raja had a special kind of wood, *malagar chandan* (a type of sandalwood considered especially sacred), brought from Puri, the land of his ancestors, and had the Deharis hew it into a new form. Since then, the *siyan* claimed, Kongal Deo has not changed his clothes.

These accounts about Kongal Deo are another demonstration of the testing of strengths between the raja and the *anga dev*, the working out of regimes of power based on exchanges, but also the raja's eventual acknowledgement of the superiority of the *anga dev*. The *anga dev* allows the raja to hunt and the raja returns the favor by giving gifts of new weapons. The raja procures valuable and auspicious material for the clothing of the *anga dev* from his ancestral home, and in doing so, acknowledges the *anga dev* as equal to his ancestors. The introduction of a new element of power, the gun, is drawn into



and subsumed within these negotiations. The raja's claim of power through the gun is nullified by his inability to use it without the consent of the *anga dev*. The possibility of a major disturbance to the balance of the *bhum* by the raja, forecast by the gun, is contained. In terms of the environmental significance of the account, one could argue that the account asserts the superiority of the ethic of sustainable hunting against the destructive possibilities of the gun.

The negotiation of powers between the raja and the *anga dev* was evident even in my meeting with the *anga dev*. Since Kongal Deo does not reveal himself except during *jatra* and my visit did not coincide with one, he came out of his cave residence to meet me but I had to climb a rather high and treacherous hill for the meeting.

The accounts around Bar Deo, one of Kongal Deo's two brothers, bear out the same insistent regime of negotiations between competing forces. The shrine of Bar Deo is located in Bar Devri, about 15 kms. Northeast of Kanker. The *anga dev* resides in a temple built in 1959 by the then *gaita* Bharat Ram Dehari with the help of Bhanu Deo. The temple is a modest brick and cement structure, painted white, with three *garbh-griha* (sanctums) devoted to Mahadeo, Ram-Janaki and Bar Deo each surmounted by a *shikhar* (conical tower). Bar Deo was earlier housed in a shrine in Kanharपुरi, one km. out of Bar Devri. This temple, which is in ruins, was a brick and lime structure, much like the palaces in the town of Kanker. It had a square base and an imposing tower ending in conical massing and a two-story front with a gallery in the upper story. Its similarity with the palaces in Kanker suggests that this temple was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the only temple of its kind for a *pargana dev* I came across in Kanker. In the compound

of the new temple, which is surrounded by a low wall, are the shrines of Shitala, Danteshwari and Guru Betal. Bar Deo is in the form of a four-limbed *anga dev*.

I was told by the 60-year old *gaita* Ojha Ram Dehari that since Bar Deo was a *barho dev*, the raja had given him 92 *mafidari* (revenue-free) villages. Dehari's claim to me comprised a re-assertion of the power of the *anga dev* and the autonomy of the *pargana* before a raja. Bar Devri itself however came under the *malguzari* given by the raja to the Jagganath temple in Raipur. Here we should remember that the rajas of Kanker, claiming descent from the ruling house of Puri, were avid patrons of the deity Jagganath, the presiding deity of Puri and also the lineage-deity of the Puri ruling family. Dehari told me that the raja would not even drink a drop of water in Bar Devri since he had given the village to Jagganath.

Dehari also claimed that Bar Deo was the maternal nephew of Chhote and Bade Pat. Given that the *gaita* of Chhote Pat in Bansla is also a Dehari, it is possible that Chhote and Bade Pat, and the three brothers Kongal Deo, Bar Deo and Khanda Deo, are Dehari *bhumihar*. However, since brother and in-law lineages are usually separate due to rules of exogamy, this question is moot. Further, Darro of Bansla had held that the Bansla Dehari could not claim Chhote and Bade Pat as their *bhumihar* since the Dehari had merely been asked by the Nahar raja to look after them. In any case, as we know, the *bhumkal* of the *pargana dev* is not limited to a clan or sub-clan and includes other village clans and castes. In the *pargana* of Bar Deo, the *bhumkal* comprises Gonds and Halbas as well as Raut, Nai, Dhobi, Gada, Brahmin and Marar villagers.

I heard several accounts of Bar Deo from the *siyan* of the *pargana* including the Dehari *gaita*, the *patel* of Bar Devri, Gada Ram Nag, and Raipuria Ram Dhanelia (who,

along with his recently deceased brother Jai Singh, has borne the *anga dev* on many occasions).<sup>441</sup> One of these accounts was about how Bar Deo appeared amidst the *bhumkal* and impressed his power upon them and the raja. Once there was a big flood in the Annaparti River that flows close by. The Dehari ancestor and many others, who were standing on the bank witnessing the rage of the river, were puzzled when they found that a log of wood, instead of submitted to the flood, was going up and down the stream along a stretch of the river. The swirling currents of the flood seemed to have no impact on its motion. The villagers dragged the log out of the river and recognized him as an *anga dev*.

The raja also heard of this and came to see the power of the *dev*. When being tested by the *bhumkal* and the raja, the *dev* told the raja that if he propitiated him, he would be able to shoot 12 tigers through their ears. Indeed when the raja shot at the tigers after propitiating the *anga dev*, his arrows penetrated the skull of the tigers at their ears. The raja thus had a temple built for Bar Deo and accepted his *raj-pat* and *mukhiyagiri* (leadership) over 12 villages. Bar Deo would make it a point to visit the palace of the raja for various festivals like Dasehra, Holi and Rakshabandhan, in the last of which Bar Deo and the raja would tie a sacred thread of friendship around each other's wrists.

In this story, the Dehari ancestor, the *bhumkal* and the raja join in testing and then confirming the power of the *anga dev* even as the deity impresses his might on them; and a bond of reciprocity is forged between the actors. At the end of our conversation, Dehari said: "Only if we recognize the deity will he recognize us as his *bhumkal*" (*haman ola janbo tabhi wo haman la janhi*). This applied to the raja as well: only when the raja acknowledges the *anga dev* will the deity acknowledge him. He also lamented that these

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<sup>441</sup> Conversation with Ojha Ram Dehari and other *siyan*, 04.10.12, Bar Devri.

days, due to the rampant cutting of trees, the flood hardly brings any log of wood down the river to the village.

In another account given to me by the *siyan*, we see how an intricate balance between the forces of the *bhum*, including the raja, is effected, the fallibility of the powerful (even the *anga dev*) is demonstrated, and the negotiations of regimes of power among the deities and raja are worked out. Bar Deo was once robbed of his jewelry and weapons, without which he was not resplendent and powerful any more. Nothing that the *anga dev* did would reveal who the culprit was. Taking pity on Bar Deo, Shitala decided to help him. After much investigation, she found that the *kaina* who lived in the village pond had stolen Bar Deo's things. Shitala then forced the *kaina* to give up the jewelry and the weapons to Bar Deo. Since then, Shitala guards the precincts of Bar Deo's temple, built by the raja, and Bar Deo shares his *pargana* with Shitala.

There was an account given to me by Shambhu Nath Usendi, a 45-year old *siyan* of Makri, about the youngest of the Kongal Deo's brothers, the Khanda Dokra,<sup>442</sup> which delineates ties of reciprocity among forces and points to the creation of inter-locking regimes of power. Talking of how Khanda Dokra, the *pargana dev* of 12 villages, appeared to the villagers of Makri, Usendi reminisced about how dense the forest around Makri used to be at one time. It was very difficult to enter and not get lost. It was from this inaccessible forest, in the time of the ancestors, that the villagers began to hear a gentle but persistent drumming. This went on for a long time and no one had the courage to investigate what the source of the drumming was. Soon, the villagers began to hear the hissing of snakes as well. A few elders then took it upon themselves to find out what was happening and what powers were calling out to them. Those who now bravely ventured

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<sup>442</sup> Conversation with Shambhu Nath Usendi, 04.13.12, Makri.

into the forest came across a cave in a hill deep inside the forest and found Khanda Dokra seated inside. The Khanda Dokra soon demonstrated his power, his specialty being the accurate divining of rain and drought, and the *bhumkal* began to propitiate him.

Khanda Dokra's fame spread far and wide and the raja, who was facing a drought in his kingdom, also came to ask him for help. Since then, Khanda Deo visits the raja on important occasions, as seen in the case of Bar Deo earlier, and Chhote Pat visits the *pargana* in return. The relationship between the *anga dev* and the raja was further strengthened when after the jewelry of the deity had once been stolen, the *bhumkal* had decided to keep the new jewelry with the raja in his palace in Kanker. Usendi thanked my late father for having taken the deity's jewelry for safekeeping. He said that the raja needed to repay the *anga dev* for his help in diving rain. Once again, in these accounts, we see the making of the regime of the village, and the working out of relationships between the raja, deity and *bhumkal* through ties of reciprocity. If jewelry in this case, as also the previous case of Bar Deo, is the sign of power, we see here an intimate transaction of power between two forces through the idea of the protection or safekeeping of jewelry.

One of Usendi's reasons for giving me this account was to solicit my help in a campaign against the commercial mining of pebbles in the Makri hills, the latest in what he saw as a series of assaults, beginning with deforestation, on the shrine of the *anga dev* and the balance of the *bhum*. Because trees were being cut indiscriminately and hills blown up to procure pebbles for construction these days, it had become easy to access the shrine: the forest was not impregnable as before. Although Usendi was confident that the deity would not be harmed because that would be too much of a risk for anyone to take,

he also told me how various people, especially those whose intention it is to cause harm and control the powers of the *anga dev*, had over time stolen the images of the attendants of the deity who had their place around the cave shrine of Khanda Dokra.

Let me now turn to another *anga dev*, Raj Kunwar of Gada Gauri, whose *pargana* was constituted, in popular memory, not by sharing sovereign power and authority with the raja of Kanker but through a partial escape from him. Raj Kunwar, who is in the four-limbed form of the *anga dev*, has his shrine in a grove near the village of Gada Gauri. Considered a *bhumihar* of the Kaudo clan, his *jatra*, though attended by other clans and caste groups living in the villages around Gada Gauri, is organized mainly by the Kaudo Gonds. I was invited to the *jatra*, which is organized every three years, in the summer of 2012. The *jatra* was called *dev-bazaar* or literally “the market of gods,” in which the Kaudo Gonds from 78 villages from across Chhattisgarh and not just the areas of the former princely states of Kanker and Bastar were attending. Each village had brought its ancestral gods to Gada Gauri to participate in the *dev-bazaar*.

During the *jatra*, which consisted of various rituals conducted over two days, my companions were the Kaudo *siyan*, prominent among them the *gaita*, 45-year old Pardesi Ram Sevta, the *dev-majhi* and president of the *jatra* committee, 50-year old Mani Ram Kaudo, and his brother-in-law, 35-year old Pratap Salam. Our conversation ranged over the history of Raj Kunwar and the Kaudo *bhumkal*, and the organization of the *jatra*.<sup>443</sup> It was clear that in living memory, I was the first raja to be attending their *jatra*. As will follow in the account, though connected to the raja of Kanker, Raj Kunwar seems to have escaped his sway with the result that there is no traditional ritual place for the raja in the

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<sup>443</sup> Conversation with Pardesi Ram Sevta and the Kaudo *siyan*, 05.03.12, Gada Gauri.

*jatra*. The *siyan*, while happy to have me in their midst, were also very keen to speak of how they had managed to avoid any royalist intervention in their practices.

I was told that the Kaudo people had come to Kanker from the plains of Chhattisgarh, the only time I found a suggestion that the Gonds might have moved from central India and not Bastar into Kanker. The ancestor Kaudo couple, an old man and his wife, who had been traveling for many days, stopped at a hill near Gada Gauri and having found a good shelter, lived there for many days. On the top of the hill, where the couple resides in the form of a stone *yon*i, the reproductive organ of Parvati, one half of the form in which Mahadeo is commonly worshipped, a son was born to them.

The son, Hoche Dokra, left his parents and wandered south towards Kanker and then into Bastar. For some time he lived in the Garhiya Pahar, but then continued his journey southwards into Bastar. The *siyan* told me that the footmarks of Hoche Dokra can be found in a cave in the Garhiya Pahar. In Bastar, Hoche Dokra eventually reached Badgai. The *siyan* complained that the Badgai people were holding Hoche Dokra, who is in the form of an *anga dev*, prisoner; and that in spite of repeated requests, they had not returned him to his rightful place in Gada Gauri. The *siyan* alleged that in the last year every time someone from Gada Gauri was sent to fetch Hoche Dokra, the Badgai people had dismissed him as *Chhattisgarhiya* (people of the Chhattisgarh plains) as opposed to themselves, who were *Bastariya* (people of Bastar).

I came across references to this distinction, between the Chhattisgarhiya and Bastariya, only a couple of times during my fieldwork. In Pidhapal, about which there will be more in the next section, a *siyan* distinguished between clan members in Bastar and Kanker in terms of their speech, calling the Chhattisgarhi spoken by the latter, in

comparison to Gondi-Halbi spoken by the former, a refined language (*sudhri hui bhasha*).

Following the account of the origin of the Gonds, the *siyan* told me that the Kaudo were seven brothers from whom had descended seven sub-clans. When counting the brothers however – as Sevta, Kola, Potai, Nuruti, Bhui, Dhuruwa, Dugga and Pawe – they realized that they had given me eight instead of seven names. They were not sure which name should be eliminated. Each of sub-clan from the brothers is charged with one task in the *jatra*, like the Potai look after the rituals of propitiation and the Bhui change the *anga dev*'s clothes. The in-laws of the Kaudo also help in the organization of the *jatra*. About six months before the *jatra*, the *dev-majhi* sends a *sipahi* (soldier) to inform all the Kaudo families about the *jatra* and collect a *chanda* (contribution) from them. Contrary to the tradition where Chhote Pat is invited to the *jatra* in the villages of Kanker, the *bhumkal* at Gada Gauri seemed to have no recollection of ever inviting Chhote Pat.

The account about the manifestation of Raj Kunwar, the son of Hoche Dokra, pointed to a possible answer. The *siyan* recounted that the *raj-pat* of Raj-Kunwar was given to him in Kanker by raja Narharideo (hence the name Raj Kunwar, meaning “prince”) when one day, Raj Kunwar's spirit suddenly descended into the raja's court in the form of a *kanch-bati* (glass pebble) accompanied by a flash of lightning. Some among the *siyan* demurred with this version and said that the spirit had appeared in a Kaudo *baithak* in the raja's Shitala temple in Kanker. In both cases, the raja was dazzled by the brilliance of the spirit but before he could do anything about it, Raj Kunwar fled the court and hid in a cave in Gada Gauri. “What if Raj Kunwar had stayed on with the raja?” I



asked. “Well,” a *siyan* shot back, “then he would have enjoyed *that-bat* (grandeur) like Chhote Pat but he would have been a prisoner of the raja!” (*ola dhar le rihtis au bandi bana le hotis*).

In this account, Raj Kunwar’s power is recognized by the raja and, implicitly, sought to be harnessed to his own as in the case of Chhote Pat who has the distinction of being a royal *anga dev* or *raj-dev* (the god of the kingdom). By escaping the grasp of the raja, Raj Kunwar rejects the possibility of the enhancement of his position into that of a royal deity and instead makes his own small *raj-pat* in Gada Gauri, independent of the raja of Kanker. The *siyan* almost taunted me by suggesting that the grandeur and comfort of the raja’s court, enjoyed by Chhote Pat, was akin to imprisonment; and that Raj Kunwar, though a small *pargana dev*, was free from the control of the raja of Kanker. Here the benefits of the sovereign claims of the raja, enjoyed by Chhote Pat, are completely rejected by Raj Kunwar for a small but sovereign claim of his own.

Another of the few areas in which Chhote and Bade Pat are little known is further north of Gada Gauri: the region of Charama. In Charama, the hills and forests of Kanker give way to the plains of Mahanadi. The landscape comprises some of the most fertile cultivable lands in Kanker, interspersed with wide stretches of grassland. The raja of Kanker had a large part of his own lands located in this region. This area also has a large population of the Raut caste, traditionally herders, who often take the name “Yadav.” From the nonagenarian Chunni Lal Yadav, a much respected *siyan* in the village of Girhola, whose family was close to the rajas and held the large *malguzari* of Sukhai, Miche Sukhai, Bangachar and Medo in the deep south of Kanker, I heard one of the few accounts during my fieldwork of the relationship of a particular caste to the raja during

my fieldwork, but one that was equally illustrative of the negotiations between the raja and the people who formed the patch-work of a polity that was princely Kanker.<sup>444</sup>

Chunni Lal told me that though the Yadav families of Charama were originally from Kannauj in north India, where the Yadav caste has a very large, often-dominant position in village society, they had moved into Kanker with their herds in the period of Narharideo (1853-1903). The raja was worried that the cattle might graze his entire crop and called the leader of the Yadavs to his court. The Yadav leader confronted the hostile raja and asked him to prove if he was a bigger raja than the Yadavs by showing that he had more cattle than the herders. The raja started collecting all the cattle in his kingdom but soon found that the herders had many more cattle than him. Defeated, he allowed the Yadavs to stay on. In deference to their power, he built a temple for Krishna, the caste deity of the Yadavs, in Kanker, and gave the god the position of a royal deity. This story demonstrates both the integration of a caste-based center of power into the raja's polity as well as that polity's further dispersal into the *bhumkal*. The raja's sovereign claims are engaged with and reworked to admit other foci and claims to power.

### **Realms Without Borders**

Let me now turn to accounts that continue to demonstrate the negotiations that go into the making of regimes of power and authority but that do so around realms that go beyond the territorial limits of the kingdom of the raja of Kanker. These accounts construct regimes and power and authority that cut across the myth of the clear territorial suzerainty/sovereignty of the rajas of Kanker and Bastar, engage with both and eventually transcend them. They also show how regimes of sovereignty are forged in the

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<sup>444</sup> Conversation with Chunni Lal Yadav, 09.30.11, Girhola.

interaction between gods and their keepers and peoples, and rajas, through a testing of strengths and balance of power; and how sovereign power is open to test, division and sharing. Power and authority, and sovereign competence, appear in these accounts as a function of skills ranging from leadership in beginning settlement and cultivation, ability to make rain, talent for detecting corruption in gods and cleansing it, specialization in curing diseases and accomplishments in music and dance.

I have already introduced and discussed Sone Kunwar *anga dev* of Bhawgir-Nawagaon in the first and the fifth chapters. Sone Kunwar *anga dev*, with his shrine in Bhawgir-Nawagaon, 10 kms. Southwest of the town of Kanker, is the *pargana dev* of 52 villages. Unlike most other *pargana dev* in Kanker, Sone Kunwar *anga dev* is oriented as much towards his position as a *pargana dev* in Kanker (and the dispensation of the raja of Kanker in negotiation with which the deity's *raj-pat* takes shape) as it is towards another center that lies outside the territorial limits of the kingdom of Kanker. This other center that divides the *anga dev*'s attention and claims his loyalty is the original settlement of Lingo in Semurgaon, Bastar.

Sone Kunwar is the son of Lingo, one of the seven original Gond brothers in popular accounts of the birth of the Gonds. The shrine of Lingo in Semurgaon, though in Bastar, is not far from Bhawgir Nawagaon. A hill trail leads from Bhawgir Nawagaon through Salebhat, Pidhapal and Kanagaon, further and further south-westwards from the town of Kanker along the north-western outcrop of the Bastar hills, to Semurgaon, which is well up in the Bastar hills. Whereas his 52 villages pull him towards Kanker, this trail, along which one can also follow the dispersal of Lingo's clan descendants, pulls Sone Kunwar towards Semurgaon. An important link in this trail is the shrine of Sone

Kunwar's mother, Bomdin Dokri, which is located in Kanagaon, between the shrine of her son and her husband.

The Sone Kunwar *pargana* is very closely attached to the raja's family in Kanker. In the entire duration of my fieldwork, I was invited most frequently to the villages of this *pargana* and I conversed most closely with its *siyan*. The extent of the *pargana* of Sone Kunwar is second only to that of Bansla; and unlike Bansla, located close to the town of Kanker and the most attached to the royal family. I visited Bhawgir-Nawagaon for various *jatra*, rain-divining ceremonies and on many individual invitations for family functions or meals in my honor.

One of the most vexing situations I found myself in during my participation in *anga dev* ceremonies throughout Kanker occurred in Bhawgir-Nawagaon. This happened when I had gone there for a rain-divining ritual. Sitting with the *siyan* in the *baithak*, witnessing Sone Kunwar mounted on a bearer making signs about the possibility of rain, I was caught unawares when the *siyan* looked to me to find out what the *anga dev* had communicated to me. With the *siyan*, *gaita* and *sirha* in attendance, I had not expected the *baithak* to turn to me for guidance. Though I had followed the ritual carefully, I did not know how to react to the *baithak*. I felt myself marooned at this point, as both raja and scholar, between the two worlds of the *anga dev* and of the historian-ethnographer. The *baithak* generously overlooked my gaffe, a fact in sharp contrast to how the world of reason dismisses what it calls "superstition."

Among those with whom I interacted, the most prominent were 70-year old Guman Singh Hidco, the *dev-majhi* of Sone Kunwar who lives in Krushtikur, his 50-year old son Arjun Hidco, both a school teacher who is writing a Gondi-Hindi dictionary and a

*bhagat*, the 65-year old Phul Chand Netam, the *patel* of Bhawgir-Nawagaon and 50-year old Laltu Mandavi, the *gaita* of Sone Kunwar. Also very enthusiastic in *anga dev* events and a tireless Gond activist with whom I conversed was 30-year old Kishan Kumar Ravan. He was one of my key resource persons. Their accounts revealed a universe of power and authority quite distinct from that of the raja's claim to "state." According to them, this regime had been recognized and accepted by the raja as a powerful one on its own strengths and terms.

According to the *pargana siyan*, when Sone Kunwar came to Kanker, he wandered around aimlessly for a long time and most people did not know him.<sup>445</sup> But since he was the son of Lingo, his powers could not be hidden for long. Among all those I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork, it was Lingo who seemed to possess a character and charisma beyond the ordinary, even among the extraordinary figures the *anga dev* are. Many anthropological works testify to the widespread popularity of the "legend of Lingo Pen," who Elwin calls a "cult-hero" among the Gonds all across central India.<sup>446</sup> Without going into the many variations of Lingo's story, which are encountered very widely,<sup>447</sup> I will recount here a summary of what I heard from my interlocutors. Lingo was the most talented of all the brothers if also the youngest. Though the other brothers were always conspiring against him, even falsely accusing him of molesting their wives in one instance and killing him in another (he was revived), it was Lingo who saved them, the earliest Gonds, from the various harmful forces of the *bhum* and brought them

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<sup>445</sup> Conversation with Guman Singh Hidco and other *siyan* of Bhawgir-Nawagaon, 06.02.12, Bhawgir Nawagaon and Krushtikur.

<sup>446</sup> Elwin, *The Muria*, 225.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-265.

to safety, past the critical point of survival. It was Lingo who taught the Gonds how to cultivate, make fire and liquor, and called the day and night to come into being. A skillful musician and dancer, he sang the Gond people into prosperity. It was also suggested that the cosmic dance was first performed by Lingo when he had brought the Gonds to safety and life. I learned that the title of “raja,” as Elwin also noted, is applied most commonly among Gond ancestors to Lingo.<sup>448</sup>

Many Gond ancestors are modeled on Lingo in one way or another. In Tarasgaon, which is mainly a village of Sori and Poya Gonds, the 50-year old *sarpanch* Narayan Sori, also from a *malguzari* family, told me about a distinctly Lingo-like ancestor Bahia Baba, a Sori *bhumihar*, who attends on *anga dev* Ran Kunwar and has a shrine devoted to him.<sup>449</sup> Bahia Baba, who lived thousands of years ago, was immensely skilled and powerful. He could create fire, douse it by turning it into water and plough the fields with tigers. When the village would turn *baghwahi* or when tigers attacked it, he would protect it. He was also a great musician and would hold the *bhumkal* in thrall with his playing and singing.

Though Sone Kunwar was not quite so talented, he was powerful enough as Lingo’s son to impress the *bhumkal*. According to the *siyan*, the *bhumkal* approached raja Komal Deo and asked him to give Sone Kunwar a kingdom. In deference to the wishes of the *bhumkal* and the powers of Sone Kunwar, the raja gave the latter his *raj-pat* of 52 villages. Shambhu Nath Usendi of Makri, who I have mentioned in the second section, had a different account. According to him, when Komal Deo heard of Sone Kunwar’s rainmaking abilities, the raja sent for Sone Kunwar. The kingdom was facing a severe

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>449</sup> Conversation with Narayan Sori, 04.20.12, Tarasgaon.

drought and none of the gods was able to help. Following the summons, the people of Bhawgir-Nawagaon hid Sone Kunwar for the fear of losing him to the raja. When the raja sent his trusted *sawar* (horseman) Chundu Kaudo (famous all over Kanker as Chundu Sawar) to look for Sone Kunwar, the *bhumkal* made him escape towards the River Mahanadi. Scouring the whole countryside, Chundu *sawar* eventually apprehended Sone Kunwar by the river near Sarangpal. The raja however had no intentions of holding Sone Kunwar and after propitiating him, accepted his control over a large *pargana*.

In Usendi's account, we see the raja trying to appropriate, as in the case of Chhote Pat and Raj Kunwar *anga dev*, the powers and abilities that reside beyond the raja's own regime. In wanting to escape from the raja, the *anga dev* shows his desire not to submit to the raja. At the end, in a mutual acknowledgement of each other's authority, a balance of sovereignty is worked out.

Despite these connections with Kanker, when the Bedma-Nawagaon dispute over Sone Kunwar *anga dev* began, the *bhumkal* looked to Semurgaon as much as Kanker for the resolution of the dispute. It is Lingo who granted permission for the making of a new *anga dev* even though Sone Kunwar was re-consecrated in front of the raja and gods of Kanker. The overlapping realms of the clan-founder and the raja of Kanker were further complicated when the spectacle of two contesting Sone Kunwar *anga dev*, the result of fraternal conflict, was subject to a test at the shrine of Bhangaram in Keshkal, the territory of the raja of Bastar. Lingo and the other *anga dev* of north Bastar are part of a system centered on Bhangaram, a deity with strong ties to the raja of Bastar. In the light of the Bedma-Nawagaon issue, the *bhumkal* of Phul Kunwar *anga dev*, the son of Sone

Kunwar in Malanjhkudum in Kanker, similarly turned to Bhangaram in order to get a decision on which of the two *anga dev* was his true father.<sup>450</sup>

As mentioned several times earlier, the goddess Bhangaram (her shrine is also called by her name) is the center of a system of *anga dev* practices similar to that of the *raja-anga dev* complex in Kanker, though Bhangaram and the *anga dev* in Bastar were not as central to that kingdom as the *anga dev* were to Kanker. As I learnt from the *siyan* in Kanker, Lambodhar Balihar, the recently deceased head of the Bhangaram *jatra*, the *siyan* of Keshkal, where the shrine of Bhangaram is located, and the Dubey *malguzari* family of Pipra-Bahigaon, the practice of worshipping male ancestors as primary deities in the form of the *anga dev* was more a feature of the Muria majority Kanker-north Bastar area in comparison to the rest of Bastar. Though this practice had spread to central and southern Bastar through the intermingling of peoples, in Bastar the worship of female deities, including Danteshwari, overshadowed that of male ancestral deities; and the forms taken by male ancestral deities were more commonly that of *dang* (pole) and *doli* (palanquin) instead of the typical form of the *anga dev* found in Kanker and north Bastar.

Because the *anga dev* practices were not so central to most of Bastar, they found a focus in the shrine in Keshkal, on the border with Kanker, in some ways the geographical middle of the Kanker-north Bastar area, rather than Jagdalpur, the capital of Bastar. Neither Grigson nor Elwin speak of this difference that can be the subject of more research. Further, it was not the Dasehra in Bastar, the key royal practice of the

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<sup>450</sup> Conversation with Phul Kunwar *anga dev*'s *gaita* family, 06.02.12, Malanjhkudum.



integration of various peoples in Bastar,<sup>451</sup> but the peripheral deity practices of Bhangaram, where the *anga dev* practices of Bastar were tethered.

My interlocutors in Keshkal at the shrine of Bhangaram were the *siyan* associated with the deity. They included 87-year old Sadhu Ram Gaur, born on the same day as Pravir Chandra, the last ruler of Bastar and the 55-year of old Kodu Ram, the designated *sirha* of the deity.<sup>452</sup> I also spoke separately to Balihar who, unfortunately, passed away within days of our conversation.<sup>453</sup> In the house of the *gaita*, a framed and garlanded photograph of Pravir Chandra had been brought out and kept next to the chair to seat me, two rajas placed side by side. Both, the group of *gaita* and Balihar, were keen to speak with me about the problems being faced by them in the conduct of the traditional ceremonies in Bhangaram.

The most important issue they voiced was the attempt by various peoples and organizations who had come from outside to brand their practices as primitive and superstitious. Two developments that followed the death of Pravir (1966) were remembered with great apprehension. Sometime soon after 1966, a certain itinerant godman called Bihari Baba (from the north Indian state of Bihar) came wandering into Bastar. With his flowing tresses he looked a little like Pravir. He deliberately started styling himself like Pravir. Playing on the sentiments of a people still shocked by the events of 1966,<sup>454</sup> marked by popular rebellion against the state and the tragic death of

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<sup>451</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 47-76; Majumdar, D. N. "Tribal Culture and Acculturation," 156.

<sup>452</sup> Conversation with Sadhu Ram Gaur and other *siyan* of Keshkal, 05.20.12, Keshkal.

<sup>453</sup> Conversation with Lambodhar Balihar, 05.20.12, Keshkal.

<sup>454</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 218-221.

Pravir in it, he began to spread his influence by claiming to be Pravir's incarnation. Those he converted to his influence were asked to wear a string around their necks as a result of which he began being called Kanthi-wale Baba (from *kanthi* meaning neck). He also began to exhort the people to give up eating meat, which he said was a sign of primitivism. He particularly condemned the Bhangaram practices of sacrificing a large number of animals at the time of the *jatra*. Eventually, the *majhi* of the north Bastar villages confronted him, and with the support of Pravir's revered widow Vedvati, asked the people to break the threads around their necks.

More recently, the members of the Gayatri Samaj, an international spiritual organization devoted to, among other things, the "awakening" of peoples based on Vedic principles, "civilized society," "social reform" and "promotion of vegetarianism," have also begun to campaign against meat-eating and animal sacrifice at Bhangaram.<sup>455</sup> In response, as we saw in the last chapter, counter-campaigns by groups for *adivasi* culture and the support of local elected representatives have managed to check the influence of the Gayatri Samaj. My visit was thus seen as a significant endorsement of the practices as Bhangaram and my interlocutors were keen to share information about Bhangaram and tell me about its connections with Kanker.

In the accounts they gave me, the raja's sovereign claims once again get entangled into regimes of power and authority centered on the gods. Even among the gods, the test of their power becomes a significant requirement in the acknowledgement of their abilities, so that no actor appears infallible and beyond questioning. The network of

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<sup>455</sup> The Gayatri Samaj is affiliated to the All World Gayatri Pariwar based in California, USA, [www.awgp.us](http://www.awgp.us) (accessed August 26, 2012).

regimes thus established cuts deep across the neat territorial divisions of the princely states and creates its own geography of power.

The deity Bhangaram, as is well known in the Kanker-north Bastar area, specializes in the investigation of gods, in telling the good from the bad, in detecting harmful forces and corruption among gods. Every year in June, during a *jatra*, hundreds of *anga dev* and other deities from northern Bastar and southern Kanker collect in the shrine of Bhangaram to be vetted and cleaned by Bhangaram. The Bastar side of things in relation to this *jatra* is better organized and more systematic. Deities from 9 *pargana* in Bastar – Vishrampur, Kopra, Adanga, Alor, Kongera, Dhanora, Pipra, Kongud and Mari – who owe their allegiance to the raja of Bastar, attend the *jatra* because the raja had given Bhangaram supervisory powers over them.

The deities of Kanker, not falling within these *pargana* and the rule of the raja of Bastar, visit Bhangaram as part of the family of clan founders based in Bastar, like Sone Kunwar and Phul Kunwar in relation to Lingo, or because the reputation of Bhangaram draws them to it. At the shrine of Bhangaram, which is located at the edge of the Keshkal hills that overlook Kanker, the presiding deity holds court or *kachheri* where one by one the gods present themselves for scrutiny. When a god is found to have been corrupted or rendered ineffectual beyond redemption, his form is dumped on the side of the shrine and the *bhumkal* is expected to make the god anew. It is to the test of Bhangaram that the Bedma and Nawagaon *bhumkal* subjected their versions of Sone Kunwar.

Though at Garhiya Pahar and other places in Kanker Bhangaram is worshipped, the deity is clearly located in and derives her position from the royal dispensation in Bastar. The accounts of Bhangaram bear this out. Bhangaram is a term used to denote

both the place where the deity is located as well as the deity herself. The deity is confusingly identified sometimes as male and at other times as female. Since the latter is the more common identification, we can take that as a reasonable way of proceeding. Bhangaram is said to have fled Warrangal after the invasion of the Muslims along with Annam Deo and Danteshwari. Though, as we have seen, Danteshwari is supposed to have followed Annam Deo northwards into Bastar, the account given to me in Bhangaram holds that Danteshwari and Bhangaram decided to take a more circuitous route, going westwards towards Nagpur (in the neighboring, present-day state of Maharashtra) first and then coming eastwards towards Bastar via Kanker.

In Nagpur the deities found that the entire region was suffering from an epidemic of *haija* (cholera). In the course of their stay in Nagpur they also came across the “*Musalmaan* Doctor,” a Muslim physician who was successfully treating the affected people with *angrezi dawai* (modern medicine). Thinking that if they took the doctor along with them, the raja was more likely to accept their powers, they killed the doctor and carried his spirit away. As they climbed the hill from Kanker into Keshkal, and therefore Bastar, they raised a huge storm to announce their entry. Impressed by their power, the raja called them to Jagdalpur and gave them nine *pargana* to rule. At the shrine of Bhangaram, there is a place for Danteshwari and for “Doctor Deo,”<sup>456</sup>

Though the practices of Bhangaram draw the Kanker deities into the orbit of the raja and deities of Bastar, there is another actor in this story who actually manages to do the reverse, that is, to tie Bhangaram, and therefore the Bastar deities, to Kanker. This deity is Kunwar Pat *anga dev*, who the *siyan* said was the *diwan* (minister) of

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<sup>456</sup> It would be interesting to note that Keshkal is the only town/village/city in Chhattisgarh that has a Muslim majority population. Most families said they were recent migrants; There are many versions of this story that differ in detail: here I give you one.

Bhangaram, without whose *salah* (advice) the deity does not act. While the *siyan* in Keshkal told me that Kunwar Pat was a warrior from Khairagarh, a kingdom in central Chhattisgarh, Manohar Netam had a slightly longer story to narrate.

According to Netam, though a warrior from Khairagarh (a princely state in central Chhattisgarh), Kunwar Pat had revealed himself to a Watti Gond family in Kanwarpalari in Kanker. The young Kunwar Pat however used to spend most of his time not with his Watti family in Kanker but with his Dhuruwa Gond in-laws in Keshkal in Bastar. Upset with Kunwar Pat's behavior, the Watti family sent him away to his in-laws in Keshkal. In Bastar, a small *bhumihar* of limited consequence from Kanker then became a nine-*pargana dev* in the company of Bhangaram. Netam told me that there was a long-standing dispute between the Gaur/Dhuruwa family of Bhangaram and the Watti family in Kanwarpalari for possession of Kunwar Pat. Apart from giving us an example of brother and in-law phratry dispute, the story of Kunwar Pat reveals the continuously overlapping realms of gods and rajas, where the drawing of borders, both territorial and otherwise, is a futile exercise.

In sum, the *anga dev* accounts provide us with alternative constructions of polity and sovereignty in which the political is not reserved for the "state" and its symbol, the raja, but widened to include other actors and realms of power and authority with which the "state" necessarily has to engage. The limited view of polity constructed in statist records gives way to one in which sovereign power and authority are not given and final but are the function of negotiations in which no one actor, and especially not the raja, can claim unquestioned suzerainty. The substance of power, authority and sovereignty in these accounts – comprising abilities, skills and talents of a varied kind often dismissed

as quaint and esoteric by dominant modernist discourses – resists reduction and rationalization into the language of the “state.”

In these accounts polity and sovereignty cannot be resolved into institutions and processes, numbers and rules, and even the person of the raja, as in the statist records, but scatter across actors and regimes of power claims of state demote as “subjects” and the passive sphere of rule. What emerges is a kingdom that the people construct: in which the people, their ancestors/gods and relations of power help to constitute, in engaging with the raja, a negotiated polity and regime of sovereignty. The people are not “pre-state” and “pre-political” but actively engage claims to “state” and subsume these claims to forge a polity that makes sense in their own terms. This contestatory understanding of the political overflows the narrow strictures of history and alerts us to operations of power that cannot and will not be swept away.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

There are several criticisms that an investigation of the present kind could invite. I am investigating state power, peoples' resistance, archives and histories. In doing so, I have dwelt at length about the peoples' gods and their power. In speaking about ancestral spirits, am I not inadvertently reinforcing the commonsense about tribal peoples as superstitious? I think not. My aim has been to question this commonsense, not merely by denying it, but by more fundamentally questioning the idea of "superstition" itself. My study shows how our idea of the "state" is itself a kind of superstition and attempts to intimate a world – our world – in which the distinction "rational"/ "irrational" dissolves. In this study, "spirits" occupy the space of the "state" and the symbol of the "state," the *raja*, is often indistinguishable from ancestral spirits/gods.

It might also be said that, in diffusing the idea of the "state," I underestimate the power of dominant discourses and effects of the colonial-princely regime, not sufficiently recognizing the subjection (and even resistance) of subaltern populations. My answer to this would be that in the case of tribal peoples where the political is either denied or borrowed, the task of claiming the political for the *anga dev* communities on terms that are not always statist and given, is perhaps a more radical move: in any case, it is the move we have to begin with. For me, the agency of the *anga dev* communities is established more fundamentally in the ways in which they shape the terms of discourse, rather than by their assimilation into strictly historical forms of agency available in dominant journalistic or historical accounts that work within the domain of reason alone.

At the same time I want to stress that my study is not nostalgic for a tribal utopia that some think we might have lost, or need to valorize. The *bhumkal*, with its hierarchies and power structures of age, gender and ritual function, is hardly utopian. The *anga dev* accounts are not pristine, untouched voices from another world, quite distinct from statist history: they are informed by the recognizably “historical” even though they go beyond it. The world of the *anga dev* is very much our world. My object has been to point out how its questions of power and authority get excluded from disciplinary history.

This study has been an attempt at investigating ways of being in this world we believe we have passed over, yet live by in many instances. It seeks to re-examine our certainties, and to explore other possible pasts and futures that are not yoked to the always already given. In my own case, it has been precisely this journey of self-questioning and of imagining beyond the familiar certainties of a historian and an ethnographer. As this project comes to a conclusion, I face an even bigger challenge of thinking about the shape and direction my relationship with the *anga dev* peoples might take in the future. I hope this project will enable me to do so with at least a measure of increased understanding and insight.

In her work on Bastar, Nandini Sundar, among others, has shown how the structures and processes of the post-colonial nation state, instituted in the colonial period and extended subsequently, have led to the establishment of a top-down, one-way relationship of paternalism and guardianship over tribal peoples.<sup>457</sup> The paternalism and guardianship claims of the state have been consolidated within the discourse of the “development” of tribal peoples, which de-politicizes “state,” “development” as well as

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<sup>457</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*; Anderson and Huber, *The Hour of the Fox*.



the dispossession of tribal peoples that results from the state's development policies.<sup>458</sup> The present day peoples' resistance to neo-liberal developmental projects in Bastar, including India's most powerful armed insurgency, has its roots in this lop-sided relationship.

It will be recalled from my discussion in chapter three that the depth and reach of the structures and processes of the modern state in Kanker were nowhere as great as in Bastar under the colonial-princely regime. The full force of bureaucratic governance and administration has therefore been felt in Kanker only after the colonial period. Though there are no studies of the impact of the post-colonial regime's development policies in Kanker, a process similar to that in Bastar can be seen as beginning here: and disaffection and insurgency have been on the rise. All of this however requires further and more careful study.

I have argued that the view of the colonial-princely polity contained in the *anga dev* practices and accounts of the past pose a counter-point, an alternative site for the negotiation of power and sovereignty, in relation to dominant projections of the modern bureaucratic government of the colonial-princely regime and the post-colonial nation state. Let me conclude my exploration by carrying this study further into the present through some reflection on two dissimilar yet connected sets of *anga dev* accounts I was given in the course of my fieldwork that engage most fully with the political regimes of the post-colonial period. These accounts could serve as possible points of entry into a full-fledged study of popular engagements with the post-colonial nation state in Kanker. For our purposes here, it should suffice to note that while the *anga dev* practices and accounts of the past take an assertive position in relation to the raja's regime, they show a

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<sup>458</sup> Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 251-253.

variety of contradictory moods, but eventually a sense of loss, in engaging with the post-colonial nation state. This sense of loss draws attention to – and allows me to reiterate in conclusion – certain core principles underlying the relations of power in the world of the *anga dev*, found in popular conceptions of the polity contained in the *anga dev* accounts I have presented in this study.

One set of accounts was given to me in the February of last year, in a *jatra* of the Kange clan in Kurutola, 15 kms. Northwest of the town of Kanker near Charama. The *jatra*, to which I was invited, had been organized by the *siyan* of Kurotola, which has a large population of Kange Gonds, and *Shri Majhi Antar-rashtriya Samajwad Kisan Sainik* (SMASKS) (The International Socialist Peasant Soldiers of the Honorable Majhi), an organization founded by Hira Singh in the years following 1947.<sup>459</sup>

Hira Singh, according to a study by Kumar Suresh Singh, “came from the respectable ranks of Deo Majhi” and began to call himself “Kangla,” from the word *kangaal* meaning poor, establishing empathy with the *adivasi* people who, in Hira Singh’s view, had been rendered derelict due to their exploitation.<sup>460</sup> Beginning with the objectives of promoting the implementation of the government’s development plans, encouraging agricultural activities and building shrines to Gond deities, Hira Singh soon came into conflict with the state when he demanded non-payment of taxes and the

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<sup>459</sup> K. S. Singh, “Transformation of Tribal Society: Integration vs. Assimilation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 17, No. 3 (1982): 1376. Kumar Suresh Singh studied the history of SMASKS in the context of his exploration of the political impact of the transformation of tribal societies due to modernization. According to Singh, the gradual spread of the “colonial system, with its economy and administration” in the colonial and early post-colonial periods, the accompanying large-scale migration of peasants to tribal areas in middle India with its imperatives of Sanskritization led to several tribal movements for the re-possession of land, culture and the formation of a tribal state. The Raj Gond leader Raja Naresh Singh and Narain Singh Uike, President of the Gondwana Adivasi Seva Mandal, demanded, at various times in the 1940s-1960s, the formation of a separate state of Gondwana with areas of central India including Chhattisgarh.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

creation of “Gondwana Raj” or “Kingdom of Gonds.”<sup>461</sup> From the late 1950s, Hira Singh began to mobilize lakhs of people, holding public assemblies in areas in the present day states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, although significantly not so much in Chhattisgarh. Terming Hira Singh’s movement as insurgency, the state imprisoned him and 18 of his key aides in 1960. After he was subsequently released, Hira Singh continued to claim he was a social reformer and maintained a large organization, but was not very militant any more.

Some of the earlier militancy of Hira Singh’s movement was in evidence at the *jatra* in Kurutola. There were scores of uniformed *sainik* (soldiers) of SMASKS lined up to welcome me. At the *dev-kothar*, where the rituals of propitiation of the Kange *bhumihar* were being carried out, the soldiers and their women auxiliaries were standing in orderly formations. I was received by a party led by K. D. Kange, the 45-year old son of Kangla Majhi (who died in the mid 1990s) and a group of dancing men and women who escorted me to the shrine of the *bhumihar dev*. A large number of Kange *anga dev* and other *bhumihar* deities from Kurutola and other places were lined up at the shrine and Kange’s mother, called “Rajmata” or “queen mother,” was conducting the rituals for them. The following accounts are taken from my conversations with K. D. Kange and the Rajmata, several senior soldiers including 60-year old H. S. Mandavi, the Kange *siyan* and the *siyan* of Kurutola.<sup>462</sup> All the members of SMASKS were Gonds.

From their account, it seemed that Kangla Majhi was originally from Kurutola where, as mentioned before, there is a large concentration of Kange Gonds. He later

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Conversation with K. D. Kange, Kange Rajmata, H. S. Mandavi and others, 02.28.12, Kurutola.

shifted base to Amapara and Baghmar in the Durg district of Chhattisgarh, in the latter of which places is now located his grave. Very early in his life, Kangla Majhi established a reputation for being an effective *bhagat*. His fame attracted the attention of Badgahin Rajmata, the dowager queen of raja Komal Deo,<sup>463</sup> in Kanker and she began to support and encourage Kangla Majhi in his ritual activities. When the raja of Kanker, Bhanu Deo, came hunting, he offered worship at the Kange ancestral shrine along with Kangla Majhi. One *siyan* recalled that once Bhanu Deo killed a man-eating tiger in Kurutola, the largest anyone had seen in Kanker. Since the people revere the tiger, the raja gave it a fitting procession. Instead of the usual practice of parading the dead animal in a bullock-cart, a group of men were asked to draw the cart around the village. Hundreds of villagers from across the region came to see the procession and threw coins in honor of the tiger, Kangla Majhi and the raja.

According to the account, in 1951, the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognized Kangla Majhi's *sena* (army). Nehru permitted the members of the army to wear a khakhi uniform with marks for rank, a nameplate and a small national flag stitched near the breast pocket. He allowed them to carry a stick and open an office in Delhi. The army comprised Gond peasant volunteers, grown to 14 lakhs in the present day, which could be called upon to defend *adivasi* honor whenever required. When Nehru died, H. S. Mandavi narrated, his daughter Indira became unconscious due to shock and despondency. Kangla Majhi who was present at the occasion of Nehru's

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<sup>463</sup> Badgahin Rajmata was raja Komal Deo's first of three queens. Her name was Shivnandini Devi but as she was from Badgaon in Orissa, she came to be called "Badgahin." She survived her husband by 50 years and died in 1975. She acquired considerable fame for her piety and charity as the widow queen. Chhote Pat was in her charge and resided in her palace (see section on *Iqrarnama*, chapter three) for which reason the deity is also referred to as "Rajmata." I have also mentioned her in the last chapter as one of Kongal Deo's devotees. See Valyani and Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, 131.

funeral thought he could revive Indira but was not allowed to go near her. Somehow he managed to get in and restored Indira to consciousness through his powers. The Kangla Majhi then exhorted Indira, who was later to become the Prime Minister of India, to overcome her grief and lead the nation to glory, as her father would have wanted her to.

According to Mandavi, despite Kangla Majhi's role in the ascendancy of Indira Gandhi, at this time the condition of his people began to deteriorate. In response to this crisis, Kangla Majhi began to organize the *adivasis* all over India to protect their *asmita* (esteem/honor) through the SMASKS. My interlocutors located the SMASKS in a rather monumental history of the Gonds. According to the senior SMASKS soldiers, the entire world was once Gondwanaland, and the Gonds, organized as 57 communities (the names of which including caste groups and were rattled off before me in a rhyming poem), were its masters. Over time, they had been rendered destitute by exploitation. Their land was no longer theirs, as were not their forests, rivers and animals. Their gods now had no place to live in. Mandavi asserted that the soldiers of SMASKS would get the glory of the Gonds back and give their gods their ancestral lands.

H. S. Mandavi also gave me an account of the formation of Chhattisgarh. According to him, when Chhattisgarh was formed in 2000, the Rajmata asked Mandavi and a group of senior leaders to visit the Chief Minister of the state and apprise him of the work that needed to be done for the *adivasi* people. The Chief Minister was not respectful of their sentiments and though he was an *adivasi* himself, told them that there were no *adivasis* in Chhattisgarh. Incensed, the party of Mandavi decided to teach the Chief Minister a lesson. Drawing on the powers given to them by Kangla Majhi and Rajmata, they stopped all the trains entering Chhattisgarh from the west through Durg. The Chief

Minister had eventually to acknowledge that he had been wrong. Mandavi proudly proclaimed that the BJP government in Chhattisgarh had now given the Rajmata the privilege of being a “state-guest,” an honor that entitles her to state protection and lodging in Chhattisgarh.

A similar sense of the loss of a world was voiced in the accounts given to others and me at Manohar Netam’s conference of the *gaita*, *guniya* and *sirha*. Unlike the Kange accounts that tended towards meta-narratives of Gond and *adivasi* loss in a clearly divided world and offered a militant response, that of Netam’s conference remained tethered to a local cosmos and its complex negotiations of power. I have discussed Netam’s initiative in some detail in the first chapter and now return to it at the end. I attended the third conference of Netam’s initiative in Kodejunga on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June of last year (2012).

As mentioned earlier, Netam’s initiative to get forest land for the cultivation of traditional medicinal herb, and for the recognition of traditional healing practices and healers, is based on the *anga dev* cosmology where the intricate balance of power between the forces of the *bhum*, including the ancestral and non-ancestral deities, raja and the *bhum*, held the secret of the continuing well-being of the world. The remoteness, costliness and formality of modern medicine being practiced in government hospitals into which his peoples were being pushed, according to Netam, was not only detrimental to the health of the *bhumkal* but the *bhumkal*’s dependence on it was reflective of the crisis in the world of the *bhumkal* caused by internal doubt regarding traditions and the onslaught of governmental policies of health and forest management.

Not long before Netam’s conference, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2011, there was a

seminar entitled “Tribal Health in Central India: Issues and Challenges” held in Jagdalpur, Bastar.<sup>464</sup> This two-day national seminar had been organized jointly by the School of Human Sciences and Tribes (Bastar University, Jagdalpur), Chhattisgarh Council of Science and Technology (Raipur) and the Anthropological Society of India (Kolkata); and was being hosted by the Engineering College of Bastar University in Jagdalpur. Addressing a gathering of “scientists, researchers, engineers, teachers and intellectuals,” the Minister for Tribal Welfare and Public Health in the Government of Chhattisgarh first lamented that “though there had been an improvement in the health activities of the state, tribal peoples in the interiors of Bastar still depended on *sirha* and *baiga*,” and then unleashed a tirade against tribal superstition.<sup>465</sup>

In contrast, several speakers at Netam’s conference including Netam, 50-year Agnu Ram Halba, a *majhi* and also the chairman of the initiative, and 55-year old Sukh Ram Netam, of the *Van Suraksha Samiti* (Forest Protection Committee) of Kodejunga, detailed the gradual destruction of forests and the difficulty in finding plants and trees which had been available a generation ago. They spoke of how the committees for the protection of forests, constituted by the government from among the villagers, had jurisdiction only over small areas of forest while most of the forest was under the Forest Department. They complained that the committees were being asked to guard the little forestland available to the people against the people themselves while the larger forest area was open to depredation by the government and private contractors. Many of the speakers focused on the way in which traditional healing was being criminalized in the name of superstition and traditional healers harassed by the police.

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<sup>464</sup> *Haribhumi*, Raipur: September 16, 2011.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

In his speech at the end, Netam spoke of how the traditional healers had been respected in earlier times. He said that the rajas themselves had great knowledge of herbal medicine and were healers with powers derived from the *bhum*. He pointed out that Pravir Chandra of Bastar, Narharideo and Badgahin Rajmata were *gaita* and *guniya* of their own standing. He then dwelt on the impact of the destruction of forests. According to him, the cutting of trees and the breaking of stones in the hills were destroying the homes of the ancestral spirits who resided in trees, rivers and caves and wandered freely in the forest. “In some time they (ancestral spirits) will become homeless,” he said, “and then they will die” (*kuchh samay baad oman beghar ho jahin au phir mar jahin*). The balance between the *bhum* and the *bhumkal* will be lost, he added.

Netam is no prophet of doomsday, nor does he reject modern medicine in its entirety. He informed his rapt audience that with great difficulty he had been able to procure 10 hectares of land from the Ministry of Forest, Government of Chhattisgarh, for the plantation of herbal plants, of which two each were in Kodejunga, Makri-Shampur and Bawai, and one each in Makri, Gare, Mageda and Kotenda. He also informed the audience of his proposal to set up a research laboratory in which traditional healers and doctors would work together on herbal medicine. At the same time, he cautioned against premature elation on this count, and asked what the Forest Minister’s inability to attend the conference after first promising to do so might auger for the project.

It is my sense that the Kange accounts derive from discourses of Gond history to which the SMASKS has been thoroughly exposed due to its supra-regional and even national experience. They take an extreme position in relation to their perception of the tribal people’s sense of being marginalized even in the present day. On the other hand



Netam's initiative and hope derive from a local understanding of the world in which power is imagined as a matter of negotiation between the various forces that constitute it; and where his people are an active and even decisive part of the regimes that emerge from these negotiations. In speaking of the "death" of ancestral spirits, Netam was poignantly reflecting on his community's increasing sense of marginalization in the nation where the space for negotiations is shrinking. Without falling into a nostalgia about the past or valorizing a pristine tribal world, an exploration of how *anga dev* practices engage with the structures, processes and discourses of the post-colonial nation state – reflected in the scores of locally based creative responses like that of Netam as well as militant positioning and even armed insurgency – might yet hold critical lessons for us.

I would argue that these accounts of loss critique – just as accounts discussed in this study did in relation to the colonial-princely regime – what they view as the imbalance of power within the relatively new field of forces shaped by the post-colonial regime. In doing so they invoke the contestations and negotiations they consider fundamental to their imagination of the world. These accounts are posited in relation to the continued de-politicization and culturization of the *anga dev* communities, their practices and way of life.

The present study has worked on the premise that we have to address the problems stemming from the stereotypical and summary description, culturization, de-politicization and then modernist re-politicization<sup>466</sup> of tribal peoples, and that our histories need to take the self-presentations of tribal peoples seriously. Rather than treat

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<sup>466</sup> By re-politicization I mean the ways in which tribal peoples are returned as agents in nationalist, Marxist and even early Subaltern Studies writings.

these self-presentations as a quaint surplus to history's own assessment, amusing, antique, inadmissible within the rationalist evidentiary practices of history through which the political is read and articulated, we need to acknowledge them as alternative engagements with the past that question disciplinary history's conception of the past and the present. As I have been at pains to suggest, however, these alternative engagements are always hybrid in nature, informed by "history" and by contemporary understandings of state and power, but also overflowing their strictures.

Taking the self-presentation of tribal peoples seriously involves the questioning of history's division of time as "rational"/"irrational": the former secular, homogenous, empty time which is its own time, universal and legitimate, the time of the authorized past, present and future of the world; the latter, the time of a pre-history, archaic and passed over. Studies have shown, and I have discussed in some detail in chapter three, that such a division of time is meant to de-legitimize and exclude ways of living and thinking that are oppositional to the secular modern.<sup>467</sup> As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, "disenchantment is not the only principle by which we world the earth."<sup>468</sup> Even when we call ourselves "secular" and "modern," in many instances we live by principles other than those of the secular-modern. Within our irreducibly plural temporality, where the distinction between "rational" and "irrational" time dissolves, that which gets designated as "primitive"/"tribal" in relation to "rational" time constitutes as much of a possibility for our time as any other. *Present* in our shared time, that which we call "primitive" does not need the condescending *re-presentation* of history. Ever present, and

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<sup>467</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Banerjee, *The Politics of Time*.

<sup>468</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 111.

therefore hardly “primitive,” it is the very condition of history’s possibility and its inherent critique. If history can be a self-critique that acknowledges its interests and limitations, we will be the richer for it.

In rejecting the “rational”/“irrational” binary, I have sought in this study to advance the possibility of fashioning historical narratives with a wider, more open notion of the archive. From this point of view, the self-presentation of tribal peoples, which cannot be tamed in the rationalizing prose of disciplinary history and is therefore unarchived and rendered “illegible,” “trivial” or “esoteric” by statist records, is recognized as a legitimate ground of being from which to engage with and contest disciplinary history. Every archive takes shape in relation to the questions one asks.<sup>469</sup> So does mine. Such an approach brings into view the plurality of our world and allows us to engage with hitherto minoritized forms of knowledge.

When we inhabit the terrain of the *anga dev* practices and accounts of the past as a *central* framework, a radically different view of tribal peoples, of power, authority and sovereignty, of polity, quite distinct from that of the dominant narratives, comes into view. In the *anga dev* practices and their social settings, in the idea of the *bhumkal*, “tribal” and “non-tribal” mix in ways that make it difficult for us to speak of clearly divided ethnic/religious communities. Despite clan and tribe based memories of origin and settlement mapped onto corresponding sacred geographies, a mixed tribe-caste *bhumkal* takes shape in these accounts at the levels of the village, *pargana* and the kingdom in response to everyday imperatives of collective life and the raja’s projects of domination and control. It is not possible in spite of ethnic markers to speak of always-

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<sup>469</sup> As discussed earlier in chapter three, I take a more general formulation from Pandey, “Unarchived Histories,” and apply it to histories of tribal peoples.

available distinct “tribal” and “non-tribal” groups that respond to predictable ethnic imperatives.

These accounts intimate instances of a popular culture that emerges from a particular politics rather than a politics that emerges from already established cultures, to use Gyanendra Pandey’s formulation on the issue.<sup>470</sup> The memory and lived experience of mixed communities is often at variance with the discourses of ethnic identity that posit tribe/caste communities as the primary type of socio-political collective. The conception of the *bhumkal* represents a universe and politics that is not determined by predictable “tribal” or “caste” imperatives even though it engages with them.

The world of the *anga dev* is a world of spirits, gods and magic but also of bureaucratic administration, elected representatives, court cases and education. *Gaita* are engineers and teachers, the police and the *anga dev* solve criminal cases together and social workers participate as much in *anga dev* rituals as in mobilizations for *adivasi* rights. An elected representative anoints a raja and a Marxist activist organizes a conference for traditional healers. We see here the inextricable entanglements of time we divide up too easily with the mythical binary of “modern”/“primitive.” I would go further and argue that the constructions of the cosmology/world of the *anga dev*, in contrast to the temporal poverty of disciplinary history, play out the full range of possibilities that is our common world, a world in which reason may not be the sole ordering principle of life. Life infuses and animates not just governments and rajas but land and forests as well.

The cosmology/world of the *bhumkal* is shaped by and shapes the conception of power, authority and sovereignty in the practices and accounts of the *anga dev*. Ancestral

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<sup>470</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, “The Politics of Difference: Reflections on African-American and Dalit Struggles,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV, No.19 (2010).

and non-ancestral forces, the relations and hierarchies of the *bhumkal* and the raja, in connected realms of being where the distinction between divine and human blurs, wield power through their abilities to impact the life of the people. Regimes of power, authority and sovereignty are negotiated through the test of the strength of these actors within the organizing principle of balance of forces where no force is pre-dominant.

The *anga dev* accounts of the past, located in the cosmology/world of the peoples of Kanker, comprise a discourse that, building from popular understandings of power and sovereignty, constitutes a complex vision of polity or political regime of colonial-princely Kanker. This is fundamentally at odds with dominant historical discourses where the tribal peoples are constructed as politically inert and non-agentive, clearly separated and closed off from the domain of “state.” The *anga dev* accounts contain conceptions of polity in which power, authority and sovereignty are a function of an intricate balance of forces between the raja and his regime, and the *bhumkal* and its ancestors/gods. In this conception, the domain of the “state” gets contested, divided and shared.

This is a view very different from that of statist sources where the political regime is presented as a limited entity comprising the raja, and a secular bureaucratic and legal apparatus, unilaterally ruling over passive “subjects.” In the popular accounts the “subjects” appear, in contrast to statist sources as well as typical narratives of victimhood or heroic resistance where the people are always ranged against rulers, to be centrally implicated in the making and working of the polity so that the hermetic division between the idea of a “state” and its “subjects” itself gets thoroughly undermined; and the “religious” is very “political” or vice-versa. The raja’s regime, including the upper caste Brahmin and Rajput *malguzars*, is drawn out and enmeshed in local cosmological

relationships. The figure of the raja of Kanker is subsumed within the local cosmos. The polity imagined in the *anga dev* accounts is tilted away from the idea of the fully sovereign modern state towards that of non-statist regimes of power in which the state-building (princely-colonial) regime is engaged with, domesticated and tied to a locally engendered and centered polity. Communities formed in the act of living together rather than “tribal” or caste formations constitute its bulwark. In so far as these accounts are a part of daily life, they inform the everyday posturing and struggles of the people.

In the *anga dev* accounts, the manifestations and staging of power and sovereignty are reworked dramatically in relation to the rational-historical and overflow that which is acceptable within it. A living terrain of rivers, forests, hills, caves, ponds and wild beasts, suffused with intimations of power, becomes the site for negotiating regimes through acts of flight and escape, and skills of divining rain, controlling the flows of rivers, hunting, singing and dancing, among other things. The conception of the ancestral cosmology of the *bhumkal* and the thrill of its cosmic play resist the taming and containing imperatives of disciplinary history. The intangible and ungraspable nature of the universe imagined in this conception exceeds the rationalizing and managerial impulses of the rational language of history. It is precisely for this reason that we need to intimate the powerful presence of this universe in imbrication with, alongside and in critique of the impoverished imagination of the modernist-historical, to signal the ineffable and aural qualities of our experience that press against historical strictures.

The present study reinforces the need to question other binarized understandings of our world as well. Along with the history/myth, rational/irrational, tribe/non-tribe and state/subject binaries, those of the political/cultural, secular/religious, divine/human,

Sanskritic-Hindu/tribal get fundamentally unsettled in the world of the *anga dev*. At the same time, and in line with the work of numerous scholars and co-workers who have made this point in one way or another, my investigation underlines the need to re-conceptualize the political. It asks us to attend to the operations of power in that which is hived off as the sphere of “religion” and “culture.” In the case of the binary Hindu/tribal, this study questions the misleading nature of the debate about whether tribals are Hindus or not, and suggests instead that we need to question the very construction of these categories. Against a binarized conception of the world, the *anga dev* practices and accounts foreground the irreducibly heterogeneous and trans-temporal nature of our shared lives.

The world of spirits, state forces, bureaucratic and judicial institutions, political parties and people’s politics – and their history – may appear rather differently in this light, not only in Kanker, or central India, but by extension over much of the bureaucratic and political territory that we inhabit in our intensely globalized, and intensely localized, world today.

## Glossary

*adhikar.* right

*adhyaksha.* president, chairman

*adivasi.* original inhabitants, a term often used by those described as tribes in official classification

*aafat.* problem, trouble

*akaal.* drought

*andh-vishwas.* superstition

*anga dev.* the most powerful ancestral deities of the Gond peoples in Kanker and Bastar

*angrez.* The British

*ann.* food

*anna.* smallest unit of currency in the pre-colonial period

*apatti.* objection

*ashanti.* lack of peace

*ashram.* hospice of a sage

*baat-cheet.* conversation, talk

*baba.* term of respect for child of high status

*bada.* big, elderly

*badalna.* to change

*bagh.* tiger

*baiga.* healer

*bairasu.* harmful

*baithak.* assembly, meeting



*bamhnin/bomdin.* Brahmin woman

*bandhana.* to tie

*bandhej.* configuration

*bandobast.* administration, arrangement

*barho/barah.* twelve, a group of 12 villages

*bashinde.* people

*bawan.* fifty-two, a group of 52 villages

*beemari.* illness

*begar.* unpaid labor

*bhagat.* devotee, often a *sirha* or *gaita*

*bhai.* brother

*bhandar.* store, treasury

*bhatt.* learned men, especially of the Nai (Barber) caste

*bhum.* earth, land, the totality of forces that make the land

*bhum-jaga.* clan center

*bhumihar.* first tiller, founder of a village

*bhumihar dev.* founder of the village deified

*bhumiphod.* that which has broken out of the ground

*bhumkal.* people, community

*bihao.* marriage

*budha.* old (man)

*chanda.* donation, contribution

*chaurasi.* Eighty-four, a group of 84 villages

*chhantni.* weeding

*chhatr.* ceremonial canopy, usually of silver

*chitwa.* leopard

*chola.* cloth, dress

*dai.* mother

*dalam.* team/group, used for Naxalites groups

*daman.* repression

*dand.* punishment

*danga-fasad.* disorder, violence and rioting

*darbar.* royal court

*dekh-rekh.* upkeep

*dev.* god

*devi.* goddess

*devta.* god

*dev-majhi.* head of an *anga dev pargana*

*dhuruwa.* priest, also name of a tribe in Bastar

*diwan.* raja's most important minister

*dokra.* old man

*dokri.* old woman

*doli.* palanquin

*faisala.* decision

*gadbadi.* trouble

*gaita.* priest

*galti.* mistake

*gaon.* village

*gaontia.* revenue collector

*gaon-wasi.* villagers

*gaon banana.* to restore a village to its proper arrangement

*garbh-griha.* sanctum of a temple

*garh.* fort

*gram dev.* village god

*gram devi.* village goddess

*gondin.* Gond woman

*gothiana.* to converse, talk

*gotra.* lineage, clan

*guniya.* the talented one, healer

*haija.* cholera

*hal.* plough

*hanal kunda.* pot of the departed

*handiya.* clay-pot

*ijaazat.* permission

*intezam.* arrangement

*iqrarnama.* a legal agreement, in this case drawn up to request the raja to allow Chhote Pat to be taken to the villages

*itihās.* history

*jaanch.* investigation

*jadi-buti.* medicinal herbs

*jajmani*. occupation-based patron-client relation among tribe and caste groups

*jamadar*. revenue official

*jan-adalat*. people's court, usually informal meetings of officials with people

*janata*. people

*jatra*. a special event or occasion organized for the conduct of rituals

*jeev/jeevranj*. spirit

*kachada*. trash

*kachheri*. judicial court

*kanch-bati*. glass pebbles

*kanya*. girl

*kashtkar*. agrarian tenants

*kasurwan*. the guilty

*katora*. priest

*khal(i)sa*. cultivable land belonging to the raja

*khelna*. play, ritual dancing of deities

*koh*. cave

*koitor*. people, community

*kothar*. farmstead

*kotwar*. village notable responsible for police functions

*kul-devi*. lineage or family deity

*lamsena*. son or brother-in-law

*madai*. annual fair

*madai bhata*. fair ground

*madai stambh.* central column at the fair ground where worship is conducted

*majhi.* village headman

*malguzar.* revenue collector

*malguzari.* revenue collection rights

*maan.* respect

*mandi.* market center

*mandir.* temple

*mata.* mother, mother goddess

*mafidari.* revenue-exempt or free

*mati.* soil, land

*mauja.* village

*meena bazaar.* children's amusement park at the *madai*

*motiari.* girl

*mukhia.* leader, headman, chief, often raja

*mukhiyagiri.* leadership

*navaratra.* bi-annual 9-day festivals

*nuksan.* loss

*nyota.* invitation

*pagdi.* turban

*pala.* flag

*palan-poshan.* nurture

*panch.* five, five notables comprising the highest decision-making body of the village/  
group of villages

*panchayat.* the most common institution of local self-government

*para.* neighborhood

*parampara.* tradition

*pargana.* territorial unit of administration, the territory or realm of an *anga dev*

*parghaana.* to receive and escort in welcome

*parikrama.* circumambulation

*parivaar.* family

*parwana.* official order

*patel.* village headman, also a caste

*patta.* official document showing land rights

*pen-rawar.* shrine of clan-god

*poochh-taachh.* interrogation

*posna.* to take care of, tend to or nurture

*prabandh.* organization

*praja.* subject(s)

*prakriti.* nature

*pucca.* in the case of houses, made of brick and cement

*puja.* worship, ritual of propitiation

*pujari.* priest

*purkhe.* ancestors

*raj/raj-pat.* kingly rule, regime

*raj-dand.* royal scepter

*raj-purohit.* royal priest

*raj-shahi.* rule of the raja

*rajmata.* queen mother

*rajwade dev.* gods of the kingdom recognized by the raja

*rani.* queen

*rasum.* custom

*rishi.* sage

*roud.* sacred site, temple, shrine

*samadhi.* grave, shrine to the dead

*samaj.* community

*samanjasya.* harmony, balance

*samdhan.* in-laws

*samiti.* committee

*samrajya.* empire, kingdom

*sankat.* crisis

*sanrakshak.* patron

*sarpanch.* head of the *panchayat*

*sawar.* horseman

*sawari.* vehicle

*seva.* literally service, ritual of propitiation

*shakti.* powers/forces that be

*shikhar.* tower of a temple

*shuddh.* pure

*sinhdwar.* main, ceremonial entrance

*sipahi.* soldier

*sirha*. intercessor

*siyan*. village elders

*sudhaar*. restoration

*tafsil*. investigation

*talaab*. pond

*tapasya*. meditation

*tehsil*. territorial-administrative division

*tehsildar/tahsildar*. foremost administrative functionary of *tehsil*

*thakur*. primary landholder, also god

*thana*. police station

*thekedar*. contractor, revenue collector

*tij-nahan*. funerary ritual bathing of the third day

*tonha-tonhi*. wizard-witch

*trishul*. trident

*uruskal*. stone memorial for the deceased

*vikas*. progress, development

*zimmedar*. responsible



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