The Agrarian Question in a Maoist Guerrilla Zone: Land, Labour and Capital in the Forests and Hills of Jharkhand, India

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As an object of ethnographic enquiry, this paper explores the significance of the modes of production debates for the radical Left in India. Its aim is modest: to investigate whether the analysis of the Indian economy by the underground Communist Party of India (Maoist), or the Naxalites, maps on to agrarian transformations in the heart of their revolutionary struggle, in one of their guerrilla zones in Jharkhand. The Maoist concern with the agrarian question is shown to be first and foremost an issue of politics, determining their strategy and tactics; the question of identifying who is the ‘enemy’, who to form alliances with and how to progress the struggle. A principal contradiction is established by the Maoists as being that between feudalism and the masses. Analysing the political economy of the hills and forests of Jharkhand, this paper reveals first how feudal relations were not established there. Second, it shows the persistence of non-capitalist relations of production in farming. And, third, it illuminates the emergence of class differentiation through processes that bypass the development of capitalism in agriculture. The argument is that it is the modern state itself that has played a crucial role in these slow processes of class differentiation in the Adivasi-dominated hills and forests of India. Analysing the agrarian transition in this guerrilla zone, this paper offers a critical analysis of Maoist strategy and tactics.

Keywords: Maoist or Naxalite, agrarian question, modes of production, Jharkhand, India, land, labour, capital, class differentiation

INTRODUCTION

To many anthropologists, the question of how to analyse modes of production might seem a preoccupation of the past. The evolutionist premises of the debates (from slavery to feudalism to capitalism etc.) were overtaken by Althusser in the 1960s and moved forward through ideas of the articulation of different modes. Attempts, inspired by Althusser, were made by many anthropologists to transcend what they saw as Eurocentric models (through lineage, kinship or domestic modes of production in stateless societies; the Asiatic mode of production in China...
or Mughal India; or the tributary mode of production in systems in which surplus was extracted by political–coercive means. Anthropologists were therefore crucial in developing the debates, with Coquery-Vidrovitch (1969), Godelier (1977), Meillasoux (1981), Terray (1969), Rey (1975) and Wolf (1982) taking the lead (see, in particular, Bloch 1975, 1983). They were followed by the likes of Wallerstein (1974–88) and Frank (1991), who argued that there was only one world-system in any case, dominated by capitalism everywhere. There was also the critique of E.P. Thompson (1978), directed in particular against Althusser, that this structural Marxism ignored questions of agency and culture. From the 1980s, the debates seemed to collapse in Anglo-Saxon anthropology more generally, and Marxist theory, which in any case had only been important to a minority, was increasingly sidelined for other projects of cultural anthropology. So now it may seem rather peculiar for me, as an anthropologist, to be reviving what appear to be rather arcane debates on the modes of production.

I was led to the modes of production as an object of ethnographic enquiry because the debates remain some of the most important amongst the radical Left in India, with whom I have lived and worked as an anthropologist. The analysis of the modes of production for them is, first and foremost, an issue of politics because its resolution determines their strategy and tactics; the questions of identifying who is the ‘enemy’; who to form alliances with; and how to progress the struggle. In fact, by rendering the agrarian question down to a simple case of defining a mode of production, or of outlining the degree of development of a mode of production, we have lost track of the more explicit political concern that led Engels to its exploration in the first place (cf. Byres 1991, 1996). Engels’ agrarian question derived from the political problem of how to capture power in countries that had a large peasantry. For the revolution to proceed, he asked the questions of which sections of the peasantry should be won over (what kind of alliances needed to be formed) and how (what agrarian programme should be formulated).

In fact, in the 1970s, the debates on the ‘proper characterization of Indian agriculture’ that ran primarily in the pages of the journal Economic and Political Weekly were internationally some of the most heated and acrimonious because of these political concerns. They were in part propelled by the challenges that the emerging Naxalite movement raised for the received wisdoms regarding the stage and strategy of the Indian revolution. The questions that dominated these debates included the following: Was Indian agriculture feudal, capitalist or colonial? How should the peasantry be defined, and what were the salient features of feudalism? Did the existence of generalized commodity production in which labour power was itself a commodity (wage labour) constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions of existence of the capitalist mode of production (Rudra et al. 1969; Rudra 1970; Chattopadhyay 1972)? Or was accumulation through investment and reinvestment of surplus value a further necessary condition (as argued by Patnaik 1971)? Moreover, should we really be looking at relations of exploitation, which may not be dominated by a capitalist mode of production, but exist within a sphere of capitalist production financing primary accumulation outside the colonies (as proposed by Banaji 1977)? Many of the debates turned into questions of definition. Those

1 Bernstein (1996) summarizes that the agrarian question is about accumulation (the extent to which agriculture can supply a surplus for primary accumulation for industrialization); about production (the extent to which capitalism has developed in the countryside and the barriers that may impede it); and about politics (the class struggle that conditions or constrains agrarian change).

2 Harris’ (1980) major review is one of the few to explicitly identify the implications of the mode of production debates for the three major communist parties in India – the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) (the antecedents of today’s CPI(Maoist)). Another exhaustive review of the literature was published by Thorner (1982).
arguing for the emergence of the capitalist mode of production made a more persuasive case than those arguing for semi-feudalism, seemingly ‘settling’ the scholarly debates. Compounded by the brutal state repression that appeared to defeat the Naxalite movement in the late 1970s, the impetus for open scholarly debate on these issues also died away.

However, more than 40 years later, the Naxalite movement lives on and so too does the significance of the analysis of the modes of production, albeit underground. The debates were very much alive in the banned armed Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)), who I came to know in one of their guerrilla zones, when I was there undertaking anthropological fieldwork with the anthropologist George Kunnath. The Maoist (or Naxalite) analysis of the character of contemporary Indian society is politically crucial for them because it determines the strategy of their revolution, the identification of the principal contradiction in Indian society, and the question of who their friends are and who their enemies are. Questions that dominated their analytical concerns include whether, for instance, the struggle ought to be between the agricultural labourers and the big landowners; whether the peasantry should align with the landless labourers and the capitalist farmers against feudal landlords; or whether they ought to forget about ‘land to the tiller’ altogether and fight against capitalism, rejecting any alliances with the rich peasants or capitalist farmers.

The Maoist basis of distinguishing the strategy for the Indian revolution emanated from an analysis of proletarian revolutionary wars across the world, dividing them into two types: the Russian and the Chinese paths. Were India to be analysed as a capitalist country, akin to pre-revolutionary Russia, the Maoists suggest that the party of the proletariat should work through open, legal struggles (through parliament, trades unions, general strikes and political agitations) as well as secret, illegal and semi-legal activities, to prepare the working class and its allies for an eventual countrywide armed insurrection. This insurrection would begin in the cities, as it did in Russia, and only then move to the country (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 37). In contrast to this, they propose that in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country such as India, the path set by Mao Zedong for pre-revolutionary China is more relevant for the revolutionary struggle. In this context, they see the principal contradiction as being that between feudalism and the broad masses, and hence an agrarian revolutionary programme as crucial. Here, the peasantry is the principal ally in a broader alliance of the proletariat, petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie against the landlords and comprador big bourgeoisie. The latter become the main instruments of the imperialist exploitation of India.

The CPI(Maoist) formed in 2004, merging the People’s War, Party Unity3 and the Maoist Communist Centre, and at the time reaffirmed their analysis that contemporary Indian society is semi-colonial and semi-feudal, under neo-colonial forms of indirect rule, exploitation and control. British colonialism, according to the Maoists, arrested the independent development of capitalism in Indian society, transforming it from feudal to colonial and semi-feudal.4 They argue that separation from Britain in 1947 turned India from colonial and semi-feudal into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, in which several imperialist powers took the place of British imperialism (making the country a semi-colony as opposed to a neo-colony). These powers, according to the Maoists, operate through indirect rule (instead of direct colonial rule), dependent on Indian ‘compradors’ who were nurtured by them in the colonial period.

While the Maoists acknowledge the importance of a capitalist economy in India, the penetration of capitalist relations into the countryside and the country’s increasing integration with the world economy, they argue that the dominant mode of production in India is semi-colonial and semi-feudal, characterized by the continued existence of feudal relations of production alongside capitalist relations.

3 Party Unity and People’s War had already united in 1998.
4 ‘The introduction of capitalist relations by British imperialist rulers without altering the feudal stranglehold over the vast masses of the peasantry had resulted in semi-feudal production relations’ (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 16).
into an imperialist world economy, they argue that the capitalist economy is distorted and that it stands on a ‘semi-feudal’ base (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 39).\(^5\) The implication is that any radical structural change is to first be brought about in the semi-feudal base: ‘The vast majority of India’s population still lives in the countryside . . . languishing under semi-feudal conditions of existence . . . and is in urgent need of the agrarian revolution’ (ibid.). The peasantry, thus, is the main force of the revolution, and the revolution of the party of the proletariat is a peasant war to seize land in an area-wide seizure of power, replacing feudal authority with ‘people’s authority’ (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 40). ‘Land to the tiller and power to the revolutionary people’s committee’ (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 49) are therefore the crucial party slogans in the centres of work where guerrilla zones are to be established. This, according to the Maoists, is to be first in ‘backward’ rural areas, where the contradictions are the sharpest. There, a people’s army and people’s militia are to be built to secure a dependable, self-sufficient base area (a liberated area), to be perpetually expanded in the course of the protracted people’s war, finally encircling and capturing the cities (CPI(Maoist) 2004a, 37–8).

Leftist critiques of the CPI(Maoist) strategy and tactics are, of course, abundant.\(^6\) Although there were exceptions (e.g. Rao 1970; Bhaduri 1973; Prasad 1987), the Maoist analysis is at odds with many of the conclusions of the scholarly debates in the literature of the 1970s and early 1980s on the modes of production in India, and with the general tenor of agrarian change in the country since the 1980s, which is explored in the rest of this special issue. Moreover, there are other pertinent questions to be asked. For instance, in what ways are the contemporary Indian economy and that of 1930s China at all comparable? Does not the Marxism of the Maoists necessitate attention to the specificity of the Indian conditions, which may lead to a strategy that is not dependent on the direct application of Mao or Lenin? These are important questions and critiques that must be explored elsewhere by others.

My purpose here is very modest and rather experimental. In the vein of social anthropology that takes seriously the categories of one’s respondents as crucial for the development of critical theory, my aim here is to take seriously the Maoist analysis of the Indian economy on its own terms and critically analyse how this analysis maps on to agrarian transformations at the heart of their revolutionary struggle – in one of their guerrilla zones in Jharkhand.\(^7\) Although the paper directly uses a household survey of nine villages (of about 2,000 people), it draws on the insights of extensive, long-term field research conducted in Jharkhand over the past decade and, in particular, over a 20-month period in a Maoist guerrilla zone. This is field research in line with the British social anthropology tradition of contextualized ethnography, which includes participant observation, unstructured interviews with all kinds of people living in the area, life histories and archival work. Readers who wish to have a wider analysis of

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\(^5\) The Maoists note that if the principal contradiction changes to that between imperialism and the Indian people, a specific programme to unite all the anti-imperialist forces will have to be drawn up as part of the general programme of their New Democratic Revolution (CPI(Maoist 2004b, 10).

\(^6\) The spokespersons of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) have criticized the Maoists, arguing that to characterize India as semi-feudal was to underplay the growth of capitalist relations in agriculture since independence. Landlordism for them defines the capitalist landlord (not the semi-feudal one). They argue that in the post-liberalization period, state support in agriculture has gradually been withdrawn and the peasantry has been exposed to global markets dominated by agribusiness corporations. This has precipitated an agrarian crisis of acute proportions. And while the solution to the agrarian question needs to include a direct class struggle against landlordism and moneylender exploitation in the countryside (just as proposed by the Maoists), there also needs to be a struggle against the new onslaught on agriculture by imperialism and against the domestic bourgeoisie (Grewal 2010, 31–2). For the CPI(M), this big bourgeoisie is the key target of the revolution (Karat 2000).

\(^7\) For the Indian Maoists, the guerrilla zones were to be turned into the liberated base areas. There are no base areas yet in India.

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everyday life in these Maoist areas, beyond the present focus on the agrarian question, should refer to other writings (e.g. Shah 2011, 2013).

What is the value of a study based on ethnographic research carried out at such a micro scale? In the tradition of scholarship bringing together macro and micro perspectives once promoted by Pranab Bardhan (1989) and his economist and anthropologist collaborators, this paper begins with the premise that an in-depth understanding of the processes under way in any one area may raise important questions for other areas and, in this case, raise questions about the theoretical suppositions that guide political praxis. In the spirit of Maoist criticism and self-criticism, then, this paper is an offering from an anthropologist to the people she lived amidst and those who are concerned about them.

NO FEUDAL RELATIONS: THE HISTORY OF LAND AND FOREST SETTLEMENT

Scholars and sympathizers of the Maoists often mistake ‘semi-feudalism’ to mean the cultural and social attitudes that accompany the historical legacy of the social relations of patronage and bondage between higher castes and lower castes in India; for instance, the subjection of lower castes by higher castes to humiliation, discrimination and degradation. So it is important to be clear at the outset that for the Maoist leadership the analysis of semi-feudalism does not relate to attitudes or values, but to the specific conditions of agricultural production that may lie between feudalism and capitalism and that have a number of features. The first condition is that the concentration of land is in the hands of a few landlords and rich peasants who do not engage in labour themselves (or only to a very small extent). Second is the existence of conditions in which labour is not totally free and there may be, or is, partial bondage. These are generally conditions of persistent usury exploitation, where enormous sums of interest are extracted from the peasantry, leaving them massively in debt. Landlords rent out land to tenants at exorbitant interest rates (at least 50 per cent) and depend on sharecropping, taking a large proportion of the produce. Third, there is interlinking of markets of land, labour and credit so that landlord–merchant–moneylenders can use this linkage to extract higher surplus from their tenants or labourers. Fourth, there are circumstances in which production is mainly for subsistence and not for market sale; where techniques of production are considered backward; and where credit for agricultural purposes is negligible. These are conditions in which accumulation in agriculture is not taking place.

So what kind of feudal relations persist in their guerrilla zones? In this paper, I focus on one region: north-west Jharkhand, the southern belts of the erstwhile Palamau district, which in colonial times encompassed what is now Lohardaga, Latehar, Palamau, Garwha and Gumla districts. Although they had ventured into the area earlier, the Maoists entered these Adivasi-dominated forests and hills in a concerted fashion from the early 1990s. They had come mainly from the caste-divided plains of central Bihar, where increasing state repression in the 1980s made it difficult for them to survive there. This expansion into Jharkhand was not guided by some romantic ideals of mobilizing a tribal peasantry, but by the tactical needs of geographical terrain for their guerrilla warfare. Similar motives guided the retreat of the Andhra Pradesh branches of the Maoists into the forests and hills of Chhattisgarh. The histories of colonization, landownership and caste discrimination of the plains were very different to those of the forests and the hills. In the plains of northern India, zamindari (landlord) tenure systems had produced large landowners and many landless labourers. While these were present in northern Palamau, in the forests directly to the south, where the Maoists built their homes, there is a different history of agrarian relations.
From the fifteenth century, a long line of tribal chiefs from the Chero community had reigned in Palamau. The Mughal rulers of India had difficulty in getting these chiefs to pay their customary tribute and the Governor of Bihar made various attempts to replace them with new compliant ones. By 1660, the Mughals managed to take over much of the open river valleys in the north of Palamau and put in place Hindu and Mohammedan nobles. However, the Chero chiefs of the forests and hills in the south retained their relative independence and continued to default in paying tribute.

The region formally came into the possession of the British in 1772. However, again, despite British attempts to co-opt the southern chiefs or replace them, they continued to default in payment. The task of controlling the area was made more difficult because the regions were rugged and very remote. Officials found the thickly forested hilly tracts difficult to traverse, as described vividly by L.R. Forbes, who was responsible for the government settlement of the area:

As you go south . . . the scene is completely changed. Here the eye is never wearied, and there is much to charm both the artist and the lover of nature. The jungle becomes forest, and the hills put on almost a grand appearance. The roads and paths wind about now over the top of a lofty eminence, which enables you to look down upon the valley below and over to the blue hills beyond, giving that indescribable longing to be there which is always experienced when looking at distant hills.

Then again you have to descend a steep ghat with huge boulders scattered here and there, and some great tree lying fallen and decayed right across your path, and loose stones which seem to require but a slight push to send them rolling to the bottom, and which make you look out for bruises for yourself and broken knees for your pony, and lucky you must consider yourself if you manage the descent without either. (Forbes 1872, 15)

Zamindari through outsiders – such as the Hindus and Muslims who were put in place in the north – proved difficult to establish. The government decided that certain areas in which the Cheros had a number of jagirdars (recipients of a feudal land grant, who were responsible for collecting revenue) would remain with these jagirs (feudal estates), but the rest were to have a different fate. In 1814, the government bought the estate in a public auction, in order to rule it directly. There was one more attempt to put in place a zamindar. However, a revolt of the Adivasis against the repression of the revenue collectors meant that in 1818 the government again resumed management of the estate. About 4,000 villages, an area of 425 square miles, came under the direct (khas) possession of the government. These villages, what became known as khas villages or khas mahal, were administered under various short settlements and eventually replaced by a regular Ryotwari settlement of the Palamau Government Estate in 1872, in which land revenue was imposed directly on the individual cultivators who worked the land (as opposed to via a landlord or zamindar intermediary).

The Bengal presidency is usually assumed to have been under zamindari rule. However, as this specific history of land tenure shows, certain parts of the forested and hilly tracts of today’s Jharkhand, as a result of government failure to establish outside zamindars, actually had

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8 This history draws in particular on L.R. Forbes (1872) and L.S.S. O’ Malley (1907).
9 As another officer put it in 1897, ‘The entire south and west . . . present a network of wild hills, which give a severe appearance to these aspects of the country. These parts are, as a rule, very thinly inhabited, and support in many places forest timber of good size’ (Basu 1897, Pt2, 6).
a Ryotwari settlement (more common to the Bombay or Madras presidency). Under the Ryotwari settlement, initially, between 1872 and 1896, the British tried a thekidari system, whereby the government estates were to be inhabited by cultivators or ryots, and over them were placed thekidars or farmers who were paid 10–15 per cent commission for the collection of rents. However, apparently, the ‘evils inseparable from the thekidari system continued . . . ’ (O’Malley 1907, 125) and the government felt the need to abolish thekidari. Thus a system of direct management under a manager located in four dispersed centres (Daltonganj, Lesli-ganj, Garu and Latehar) was introduced at ordinary tax rates. The result was that, unlike the neighbouring regions of the Chotanagpur Plateau or the plains of central Bihar, in vast sections of these rural areas there were no landlords.

Revenue collection was the raison d’être of the government in this area. But the problem for the government, as noted by the officer in charge of the report on the agriculture of the area, was that they were dealing with a constantly moving tribal population that did not practice settled agriculture. Said one officer,

Many tribes like the Brijeahs, Birhors, Agoreahs, Asurs, Kherwars, have not yet been weaned from their nomadic life. Many of these lead lives in no way removed from those of the most primitive people that we read of – living as they do entirely on wild herbs and roots and the produce of the chase – while others, equally nomadic in habit, grow a few hardy crops, like rahar, til, urid and bodi, by a very rude system of agriculture. For this purpose they neither possess plough nor hoe, but merely make small holes in the ground with a sharp pointed bamboo, into which they drop one or two seeds. They rarely remain in the same hill for two successive seasons. (Basu 1897, 6)

There was very little settled rice cultivation. The tribes cultivated cereals (such as sanwa, genora, joar and goradhan) which, as opposed to paddy rice, did not need irrigation. They also depended on forest roots, leaves, fruit and mushrooms. Notions of private property of land were poorly established, making the task of revenue collection from this sparsely populated mobile landscape difficult.

To ease revenue collection, the British sought to establish settled agriculture and actively encouraged the more agricultural Oraon (and Munda) tribes to move from the neighbouring areas of Chotanagpur. It is difficult to trace exactly how these processes worked. A few Oraons were already present before the British settlement and it is possible that they too were moving to and fro between different places. At the time of research, in some of the villages the Oraon households with the longest histories in the area traced their migration back to only the beginning of the twentieth century.

Perhaps settled agriculture, and with it notions of private property, were encouraged the most through the reservation of the forests. After a period of massive deforestation for military purposes, for shipbuilding and for the teak export trade, and then for railway sleepers, the Governor General feared that the British had exhausted India and Burma’s large forests. In 1864, he called for the establishment of a department that could ensure the sustained availability of the railway sleepers essential to Empire (Guha 1985). Soon, certain forests were chosen for reservation. All rights of the populations living amidst them were removed, and the entire forest area came under direct control of the government for management and tree production. At first, these reservations were established in the north – in

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10 Direct systems of management have in other areas proved to be as repressive as zamindari. See, for instance, the accounts of Deshmukhs in Telangana (Sundarayya 1972).
the Himalayan tracts such as Garwhal and Kumaon (Guha 1985) – but later, by 1875, the government recommended the extension of reserved forests into the south. Under William Schlich, five forest divisions were created in Darjeeling, Jalpaigiri, Sunderbans, Chittagong and Palamau (Schlich 1885). Sivaramakrishnan (1999, 115) notes that on many occasions, land settlements coming under direct government taxation (khas villages) served as an opportune moment for surveying tracts of forest and wastelands as separate blocks and reserving them for government use. Indeed, this was what seems to have happened in the Palamau Estate, where the first lot of rich forests (with sal and many other local species), an area of 188 square miles, was reserved between 1879 and 1884, and a further 71 square miles became Protected Forest. Reserves were areas where the designated land was entirely brought under government management. Protected Forests contained specific tree species that were not to be felled without government sanction. Reservation of the forests officially removed the rights of the Adivasis, who had previously enjoyed untramelled use of their forests. Undoubtedly, this forced the population to be sedentary rather than more mobile.11

The reservation of the forests also introduced a new population of outsiders, who came to work the forests and serve the markets opened up by forest harvesting, and who further encouraged settled agriculture in the area. From the agricultural plains of the north (Aurangabad, Gaya and Patna districts of Bihar), higher-caste Hindu (almost all were Sahus – termed OBC, or Other Backward Classes, by the Indian government) and Muslim traders12 ascended into the densely forested and hilly terrains, as did landless Dalit labourers (mainly Ghasis). While most of the villages in the area remained predominantly Adivasi, these outsiders agglomerated in certain villages that became centres for markets and trade in the entire region – the bazaar village. The Dalit labourers worked the forests and built houses on the edges of the jungle and the bazaar. The Hindus and Muslims traded mainly in the forest economy. They were involved in the felling and transportation of timber. But there was also an expanding trade in non-timber forest products collected by Adivasis and Dalits and then traded by the OBCs out of the area – products such as sal seeds (from which soap is made), mahua flowers from the mahua tree (from which alcohol is distilled), chirondhi seeds (for oil) and khair (the sap of the kacchethu tree, used to produce an expensive paste for the chewing of pan), and later on kendu leaves (from which the Indian cigarette bidi is rolled) and also mohallan leaves (from which leaf plates are made). A few Muslim households came specifically to trade the hides of wild animals – tiger and lion skins were particularly sought after. It seems that initially there may have been just three or four individuals who arrived in the bazaar village from the northern plains of Bihar, but over time, their families, their kin and other caste associates followed them to eke a living off the developing forest-related economy.

It is, of course, difficult to trace the migratory and demographic changes of the area with precision. However, compared with many other parts of India, these were still scattered and small villages. Even in 2010, most of the villages in these forest regions were less than 50 households, while the largest of the villages, such as the local bazaar one, had not much more

11 Guha (1983, 1883) notes that decimation of the forests was hastened by attitudes prevalent amongst administrators that the forests represented an ‘obstruction’ of the country, and their removal would add to the class of revenue-paying landowners.

12 The Muslims were from several different social groups – some were higher castes such as the Pathans, but other were from lower castes such as the Darjees and Kalals, and there were a few very low castes, such as the Sahs and Pavarias.
than 220 households (less than 1,100 people). The newcomers were not agriculturalists, but they did occupy arable land and grew rice for their household consumption. As is common in many parts of the world, the oldest occupants had the most land and those who came later occupied much less. However, even the most endowed Sahu at the time of arrival seems to have had less than 20 hectares. In general, it seems that in comparison to other parts of India, particularly the agricultural plains, there have been almost no medium-sized landholders in the area, let alone large landowners. Land was not the main source of surplus extraction in the area. The OBCs and Muslims used land mainly for homestead and self-consumption and the more important source of surplus extraction for them was through the product (and credit) market. When land reforms brought land ceilings in place in the 1950s, the few who had surplus land sold it though some re-registered land in the name of their kin – sons and nephews predominantly (some Muslims re-registered land in the name of daughters as well as sons).

The different histories of migration and land occupancy resulted in differentiation within these trading classes, as some were more powerful and better off than others. While the newcomers were only a very small minority of the total population, their settlement patterns, together with the new restrictions on the use of the forests for Adivasis, as well as the previous introduction of rice-cultivating Oraon migrants to the area, are likely to have encouraged much of the general Adivasi population of the area to settle into villages and cultivate particular plots of land.

The demographics of the area thus changed. Whereas once the entire region would have been 100 per cent Adivasi, by 2010, in a survey of nine villages (a total of 386 households with a population of just over 2,000 – see Table 1), including the local bazaar village where all the newcomers settled, it was 50 per cent Adivasi and then 25 per cent Dalit, 10 per cent Sahu and 15 per cent Muslim.

In these nine villages, the pattern of landownership was as shown in Figure 1: 26 per cent of all households in the area were landless (of which 64 per cent were, as one would expect, in the bazaar village that had attracted the outsiders); 60 per cent of the households owned less than 1 hectare of land; 9 per cent owned between 1 and 2 hectares of land; 3 per cent owned 2–4 hectares of land; and only 2 per cent owned more than 4 hectares of land. Nobody in the entire region owned more than 10 hectares of land.

If we look at these figures through the lens of different social groups, we see in Table 2 that landlessness was the most common amongst Muslims (71 per cent of whom were landless), then Dalits (who were Ghasis and of whom 47 per cent were landless) and finally

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13 It must be noted, though, that in 2010 there were tribal groups in these forests classified as ‘very primitive’ by the government (such as the Birhors, the Paharias and the Birjias) who, despite continued efforts for the government to settle them (for example, through the provision of housing grants), rarely lived in one particular house and continued to move between different sites.

14 Landownership was exceedingly difficult to measure in the area. Despite various attempts, official government records of the village khatijans proved impossible to get hold of. Many people did not know how much land they owned and could provide estimates only in terms of rice yield. It is possible that many households were cultivating ghair-marjra, or forest lands, but may have not revealed the amount of this land. Calculating landownership was further complicated by the fact that all these lands were of varying quality. Doin (the lowland) was more productive than tanr (upland), but it was extremely difficult to measure how much of someone’s land was, respectively, doin or tanr.

15 If we remove the landless and look at relative levels of landownership amongst those who have some land, 81 per cent of all landowners in these areas were marginal farmers in comparison with the all-India level of 70 per cent of all landowners who were in the same period marginal farmers (up from 39 per cent in 1960–1). And while there was nobody in these areas who had more than 10 hectares of land, at an all-India level 1 per cent owned more than 10 hectares (down from 5 per cent in 1960–1) (for the all-India figures, see Lerche 2011).
the higher-caste OBCs (25 per cent of whom were landless and who, except for two households, were all Sahus). Driven by the expansion of the forest economy, all these groups came into the hilly forests from the agricultural plains of north Bihar (Gaya, Patna and Aurangabad) as either labourers or traders.16

There was very little landlessness amongst those who had a longer history in the area – the various Adivasi groups. For instance, amongst the Oraons there was no landlessness and amongst the Kherwars/Bhuiya, 13 per cent were landless.17 In fact, the majority of the larger

16 Note that the Lohras have a longer history in the area than the Ghasis and the Bhuiyas. They served the Adivasi communities and although they are classified as SC in Jharkhand by the Indian government, they were in fact historically and sociologically closer to the Adivasi communities in the region than to the Dalits, who have come from the Hindi heartlands – the plains of North Bihar.

17 It is possible that the five Bhuiya households actually here came with the Dalits from Bihar. In Bihar, they were classified as SC, whereas in Jharkhand they were ST. Their pattern of migration and landownership was likely to be more similar to that of the Dalit Ghasis than the Adivasi Kherwars. If this was the case, then landlessness amongst the Kherwar group would drop to 1 per cent only. However, as I was not able to verify the migration history of these households, they have been placed in this paper along with the Adivasis and not the Dalits, because they are classified as ST in Jharkhand. Note that some of the nearby villages higher up in the hills, which house Birhors, Birjias and Paharias, were not surveyed but almost all households there too had land.
plots of land in the region were owned by Adivasis. Moreover, though they accounted for only 1 per cent of the households in the area (five households altogether), all the households that had more than 4 hectares of land were Oraon.

To summarize, a number of features need to be noted in relation to land–forest relations in the region. First, historically, this was a sparsely populated forested and hilly landscape, in which notions of private property in land and forest were not well established. Slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting and gathering were the traditional economic base for the many tribes that lived in the area. It remained a sparsely populated landscape with a highly mobile population, despite various efforts of Mughal chiefs and then British officers to settle the area for the purpose of land revenue collection and administration. Second, the population was forced to be more settled at the turn of the century because of the reservation of the forests, and the introduction of outsiders from the settled agricultural plains of the north of Bihar via the development of logging and the non-timber forest economy.

Nevertheless, and third, the pattern of revenue collection in this area meant that landlords were not established in the region. The more powerful higher-caste outsiders who came to the area also did not establish relationships that bore any resemblance to ‘feudal’ ones. They did not invest in agriculture, as their prime interest was trade in the forest economy. Size of landholding was an insufficient indicator of class status in the area: many Adivasi households, in fact, had more land than the wealthier Sahu or Muslim outsiders. Moreover, even while the kin of the higher castes in other parts of the country (such as in the agricultural plains of Bihar) may have invested in land, these tendencies did not spread to the forest regions because of the specific protectionist measures introduced and enforced by the state, which prevented Adivasi land from being sold to non-Adivasis.18 Significantly, then, incentives for accumulating and investing in land, even for these higher-caste outsiders, were thus limited. Very exploitative money lending practices that were commonly linked to landlord–tenant relationships also did not appear to have developed extensively in these regions: at the time of research, there were no large moneylenders in the area (see below). It appears that feudal relations were never established in these regions.

18 In Jharkhand, this was the result of various laws that were created to protect tribal lands for the tribals after the tribal rebellions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A codification of customary rights to land was the most marked in the 1908 Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, which prohibited the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals (see Shah 2010, 14–15).
PRODUCTION RELATIONS IN AGRICULTURE: THE PERSISTENCE OF NON-CAPITALIST RELATIONS

Given the lack of history of feudal relations, have capitalist relations of production developed in agriculture in the area? Farming in the region continues to show an overwhelming persistence of non-capitalist relations best explored through the examination of land relations, credit and finance arrangements, technology, production for subsistence and labour relations.

Land Relations

As discussed in the sections above, there was almost no market for land in the area. Land was handed down through family descent groups. Tribal land was protected by the state from being sold to non-tribals, further discouraging the active development of a land market in the area.

Credit and Finance

Credit for agricultural purposes was almost negligible. Only 1 per cent of the population took loans for agriculture, and this was usually for the purchase of cattle or for diesel engines, and taken from the bank. The government was providing diesel pumps for irrigation to Adivasis and Dalits at subsidized rates. However, these motor pumps were most commonly purchased by the Sahus, in the name of Adivasis and Dalits, and then rented by others.

Loans taken by the majority of the population were for consumption purposes, marriages and illness, not for investment in agriculture. As noted above, there were no large moneylenders in the region. Individual shopkeepers would accept delayed payment without charging interest on consumption goods bought by households who had a member migrating away on the assumption that the goods sold would be paid by remittances within a few months. To service debts that could not be easily repaid (e.g. court fees, medical costs or marriage costs), households would first and foremost seek loans from better-off kin or neighbours. These loans rarely incurred interest. A common means of paying off such a household debt was by seeking an advance from a labour contractor in exchange for a portion of the wage. Those who had land could, in times of need, mortgage it as ‘bandhik’. There was no monetary interest charged on this land, though the produce of the land would of course belong to the person who took the land. The land would be given back at the same price as it was mortgaged when the original owner had accumulated enough money for its release. It was only rarely that loans were sought from better-off unrelated villagers. The interest for these was determined on an individual basis, but was no more than between 3 and 5 per cent a month. So although there were various practices of exchange and money lending in the area, crucially loans were not taken for agriculture and there was no class of highly exploitative influential moneylenders.

Technology

Investment in agriculture throughout the region, and across caste groups, was minimal. Green Revolution technology was starkly absent. There was no electricity. While most households developed beyond the crude system of sowing seeds via a hole created in the soil by a bamboo pole (that Basu 1897 once described), all the land – even that belonging to the most wealthy households – was still worked with a wooden plough pulled by yoked oxen or water
buffalo. Although two Sahu households in the bazaar village under a government development scheme bought two tractors at the end of the millennium, these were used for the transportation of building materials and not for ploughing. Threshing was solely by cattle driven in circles over the rice, and by manual labour. This was indeed a very different landscape to that described by Jodhka (2011) in Haryana or Lindberg and Djurfeldt in Tamil Nadu (2011). (In the Haryana villages that Jodhka re-studied, even by the 1980s a large number of farmers had tractors. There, by 2011 there were no bullocks at all and everyone used a tractor [whether they owned or hired it] for ploughing. Threshing was so advanced that mechanized threshers were a remnant of the past and had been replaced by combine harvesters.)

Most of the forested plateau of north-west Jharkhand depended on rain-fed agriculture and there was only one rice crop in the kharif (rainy) season. Almost everyone prepared seed at home – seeds were not bought in the market. Seedlings were transplanted but paddy seed was also broadcast by hand. The soil was fertilized by cattle manure, although some of the wealthier Sahu and Oraon households used chemical fertilizers. Immediately after the rice was harvested, in the rabi (or winter season), a crop of maize was planted, in particular by the poorer households.

Subsistence

Capitalist relations in agriculture cannot exist without commodity production (production for sale). But here, production was primarily for use, and not for sale. Apart from a handful of Oraon households, who in the event of a good harvest might sell surplus to neighbours, all crops produced were for household consumption. Corn meal was considered inferior to rice by the higher castes, but eaten by poorer households. After the rabi crop, various lentils (such as chick pea, mung dal, arad dal and khesari) were planted alongside mustard seeds for oil.¹⁹ Again, these lentils were for household consumption and not sold in the market.

Forest fruits, flowers, leaves, spinach and mushrooms (sometimes also found in the fields) were an extremely important part of the diet for most Adivasi households and also relied on by Dalits to supplement their diets. These nutritious forest products were, however, considered ‘jangli’ (wild and savage) by the migrant OBCs (and some Muslim households). And despite the fact that many OBCs were poorer than the Adivasis, most of these higher castes would not admit to collecting forest products for household consumption. This marker of their higher status differentiated OBCs from the ‘backward, wild and savage practices’ of the Adivasis. Those who could take the initiative planted vegetables such as aubergines, tomatoes, peas and onions in the bari (gardens) next to their houses and irrigated them with well-water all year round. IRDP programmes had supplied motor pumps to some households, but across the region much of the irrigation was still manual. These garden vegetables were primarily for household consumption. If there was a small surplus, it was sold in the weekly market in the bazaar village and bought by other villagers: it did not leave the local area. (There were no traders who came to collect vegetables, or rice, for the market.) All cultivation was therefore for household subsistence and the few households that had a surplus in some seasons only sold locally to other villagers. The profit from these local sales was used for education and household consumption. Even amongst the better-off households, there was very little reinvestment of surplus in agriculture to further the reproduction of agriculture at an expanded scale; another indication of the non-capitalist characteristics of agricultural production.

¹⁹ The poorest households relied on oil called dori, squeezed from the fruit of the sal tree.
Labour Arrangements

Capitalist agriculture is typically said to deploy wage labour. Here, however, every household worked its own land through family labour. This included the higher-caste Sahu households. While there were three Oraon households that employed labour all year round to work on their bari, the employment of year-round agricultural wage labour was otherwise almost non-existent. A handful of the more wealthy Sahu households that did not care to engage in agricultural work gave out their land in ‘adhi-bathai’, or sharecropping, to poorer Oraons or Ghasis in exchange for half the crop. However, this accounted for only about 0.05 per cent of the total population. Oraon households whose men had migrated to work also sometimes gave their land in sharecropping to other Oraons or Ghasis. These arrangements were casual, often between kin, and an indication of households that did not want to sell their land but could not be bothered to till it, rather than of the class differences between them. In the rainy season, those who did not have oxen or buffalo for ploughing their land, hired in labour with oxen at Rs. 60 a day. Both rich and poor households alike, in need of oxen, pursued this practice. At times of intensive labour needs (e.g. sowing or transplanting paddy or harvesting), in the case of larger landholders such as the more wealthy Oraons and some Sahus, additional labour was hired in.

Most Adivasis participated in a communal system of labour exchange known as madaiti, where households exchanged their labour for free – what Harriss-White et al. (2009, 526) call generalized sharing. This sharing was organized through the parha, but there were also specific-labour sharing arrangements between particular households, which were both open-ended (two or more households sharing labour throughout the year for a range of tasks from grazing to firewood collection to house-building and rice sowing) and limited (where two or more households exchange a mutually agreed number of working days). Therefore, it cannot be said that a class of agricultural wage labour had developed in the region.

Landlessness is often taken as a sign of proletarianization – whereby the commodification of land results in differentiation that dispossesses peasant farmers. The enclosure of the forests did not cause landlessness in this area: it forced the shifting–cultivating tribes to settle in villages scattered through the forests, taking up land in a sparsely populated area. Landlessness in the region was mainly a consequence of the later in-migration of poorer Dalit, Sahu and Muslim households, following the development of the forest economy and trade, as already explained. They subsisted on either petty trade or manual labour. It is important to note that 64 per cent of all landless households were concentrated in the bazaar village where the outsiders agglomerated. More recent migrant households that had come to the area because of kinship links were given land by their kin for the purpose of building their houses only. Apart from these more recent migrants, almost everyone who had a longer history in the region still owned some land. While there were landless households, it cannot be concluded that landlessness in the area was a symptom of class differentiation caused by the development of capitalist relations in agriculture.

To Summarize

In these villages, the land, and tools and implements required for agricultural production were more or less owned by households, so there was minimal separation of workers from the

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20 However, see Banaji (1976).
21 Agricultural labour rates in the village were very low (Rs. 30 for men a day and Rs. 40 for women per day). The Maoists did not raise them, presumably because majority of the villagers would suffer themselves, since there were no landlords or those who had excessive amounts of land.
means of production. Moreover, production was for use and not for exchange. Furthermore, there was very little wage labour in agriculture. Hence, there was no evidence of the dominance of capitalist relations of production in agriculture, which would require the presence of all of the above conditions. Whereas Thorner had concluded almost 30 years back that capitalism dominates Indian agriculture, in these remote forested and hilly tracts of eastern India where the Maoists have established their guerrilla zones, it is impossible to conclude, even today, that capitalist relations in agriculture were fully developed across the region. Agriculture in these forests and hills of Jharkhand was, more or less, still for subsistence.

THE NON-AGRA RIAN RURAL ECONOMY AND CLASS DIFFERENTIATION: THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Marx had expected that the process of capitalist development in agriculture would create 'peasant dispossession by displacement' or enclosure; and Lenin added 'peasant dispossession by differentiation' as capitalism would exploit labour, improve productivity, cut the costs of production and commodify (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010). The model was of the creation of polar classes. But in the forested and hilly regions of central and eastern India, even at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the complexity of livelihoods makes it difficult to argue for the straightforward 'death of the peasantry', as Hobsbawm (1994) once put it.

In the past two decades, however, the seeds of class differentiation were taking shape amongst the Adivasis in the region. The changes were extremely small in scale and once again the dynamics were distinctive. This differentiation was not, as Maurice Dobb (1963) argued of England, because of internal processes in the agrarian society of the area. Nor did it seem to be the result of the kind of external processes that were important to Paul Sweezy (see Sweezy et al. 1976) in the development of agriculture, processes in which the state had played a very large role in other remote tracts of India (cf. Harriss-White and Mishra on Arunachal Pradesh). Rather, class differentiation in the region appeared to be the result of processes bypassing the development of capitalism in agricultural production (Bernstein 1996; Lerche, this issue) and, as I shall argue, very much a result of processes of state formation and the extended reach of the state itself.

What are the processes driving this capitalist transition?

Integration in Commodity Relations

The livelihoods of the Adivasi households who make up about half of the population of the area and who have a much longer history in the area (than the Dalits, Muslim and Sahu newcomers) have transformed over the past half century. The simple reproduction needs of all

22 For Dobb (1963), feudalism ended because of the class struggle between landlords and peasants, whereby some peasants escaped from their feudal obligations and became capitalist.

23 For Sweezy (see Sweezy et al. 1976), an expansion of trade that increased commodification and prepared the ground for capitalism was crucial to the demise of feudalism.

24 Moreover, recently, Bernstein (1996) has asked whether under neoliberal globalization, the agrarian question is relevant any longer. Neoliberal reforms in India, at a rate second to that only of China, have indeed targeted sectors catering for the urban middle classes and export markets. Bernstein’s (1996) proposition that access to global capital is allowing many developing capitalist economies to generate surplus industrial growth independently of the development of agriculture seems to apply to India. (Between 1994 and 2005 the annual growth rate of agriculture increased by only 0.6 per cent, compared to 2–4 per cent in most years since independence (Lerche 2010, 67).
households in the region were increasingly met through commodity relations. Thus, although 
many of a household’s needs were still fulfilled by local products (e.g. houses were built from 
mud, cow dung, bamboo and wood found in the forested areas), increasingly health services 
of the local quacks, clothing, utensils, soap, spices, torches and batteries were bought in the 
market. For the majority of the Adivasis and Dalits, money for these purchases came from the 
collection and sale of forest products (e.g. kendu leaves, mohallan leaves, mahua flowers) and 
increasingly wage labour (mainly through migration).25 From being predominantly hunter– 
gatherers and subsistence farmers, while most Adivasis continued to have land that they 
farmed, they also increasingly relied on wage labour in the non-agrarian sector to reproduce 
their households. Thus many of these households had a history of seasonal casual labour 
migration (43 per cent of Oraon households, 65 per cent of Lohra households and 26 per 
cent of Kherwar households migrated).

**Demographic Pressures**

Additionally, together with increased basic household consumption, education and healthcare 
needs, increased demographic pressures that divided land amongst more households have 
further encouraged the Adivasis to take up wage labour in the non-agrarian sector. If prole-
tarianization is the result of poor peasants forced to relinquish their petty ownership in land 
to rich peasants who are accumulating land and surplus products in agriculture, the differenti-
tation taking place in this region among these producers seemed to be for the most part not 
the result of classical proletarianization, but of pauperization due to population pressure on 
resources. These were people who were not selling or giving up their land, but were now 
trying to reproduce in conditions where agricultural conditions were so poor that agricultural 
returns were insufficient for social reproduction.26

**The Role of the State**

The majority of the Adivasis (approximately 90 per cent) depended on subsistence farming, 
hunter–gathering and wage labour in the non-agrarian sector, through which there was very 
little development of class differentiation. However, the seeds of a slow class differentiation 
were emerging amongst the Adivasis because of processes encouraged and promoted by the 
state – the combined effects of education policies and various forms of positive action for 
Adivasis (for a comparative discussion of these processes in a neighbouring area of Jharkhand, 
see also Higham and Shah 2013). Although literacy rates were very low in these regions (65 
per cent of the population was illiterate),27 the expansion of education resulted in a small 
section of the Oraons benefiting from reservations in government. Eleven Oraon households

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25 Migration itself has resulted in transforming perspectives and aspirations encouraging the monetization of 
the economy. The better-off migrant labour was able to increase consumption back at home (for example, some 
of the better-off Adivasis now choose to use a toothbrush and toothpaste rather than acacia sticks, or hope to 
buy plastic chairs for guests to replace sitting on the floor on home-made reed mats).

26 The Government of India, Ministry of Finance (2007) has argued that agricultural returns in India were 
usually insufficient to enable agricultural labourers and landowners of small plots to survive on farming and 
farm work. Marginal farmers have to engage in wage work, and more than half of their income is from such 

27 Excluding those who were not still in education or too young to be counted, 65 per cent of the population 
was illiterate; 35 per cent had education up to and beyond primary class 5; 14 per cent had had education up to 
and beyond primary class 8; 14 per cent had passed matriculation (the equivalent of GCSEs and beyond); 3 per 
cent had passed intermediate (the equivalent of ‘A’ levels and beyond); 0.8 per cent had passed an undergraduate 
degree and only 0.08 per cent (1 person) had passed a master’s degree.
State-sector jobs provided a means of saving from salaries. A small minority of these households made some minimal investment in agriculture; the only households that produced a surplus of vegetables to sell in the local market were of this kind. However, like the more well-to-do Sahu and Muslim households in the area, reinvestment in agriculture was not a priority for these Adivasis, as the returns were so low. Rather, they sought to invest in some form of trade, albeit that promoted by the state, for which they often attained preferential treatment – for instance, loans to buy jeeps used for public transport, Public Distribution System (PDS) dealerships and, increasingly, government development contracts. Yet, we cannot argue that we were seeing here a transition of Adivasi peasants into simple/petty commodity producers subordinated to capital through the circuits of exchange (see Harriss-White 2012), because this category of households accounted for no more than 10 per cent of the Adivasi population. And, moreover, unlike the Sahus and Muslims, the majority of the Adivasis (and Dalits) simply had no aspirations to engage in petty commodity production and relied instead on subsistence farming, hunting and gathering, and manual labour in the forest economy and non-agrarian sector.

What about class differentiation in the other half of the population; the social groups who arrived later into the area as a result of the expansion of forestry into the region? We have already established that the state was responsible for the development of the forest economy, particularly logging, in colonial times. The harvesting of the forests brought in two types of migrants to the area. First, there were Sahu and Muslim traders of varying wealth – some who faired well off the forest economy (e.g. through trade in forest products) and others who merely survived at its margins, selling utensils or brewing alcohol for instance. Second, there were poor Dalits who arrived as wage labour for the logging.

Changes in the national policies in forestry in the 1980s that prioritized conservation over logging had different kinds of impact on these two groups. The wealthier Sahu and Muslims were adversely affected. Although trade in non-timber forest products continued, the huge trucks that used to thunder through the landscape carrying logs declined (though illegal felling was stopped only by the Maoists when they entered the area). Many of the older generation of more wealthy Muslim and Sahu households lament the glorious days when the bazaar village felt like a city. With the decline of logging, these households had to seek other means of reproducing. While trade in non-timber forest products continued, some set up clothes shops in the village, others established stores selling everything from soap to spices and torches, or went on horseback to weekly village markets selling these goods. Still others set up restaurants serving tea and frying samosas and sweets, or put their skills to tailoring. Many sought to make a living indirectly off the state – either by securing the contracts of road building programmes or establishing PDS dealerships in the area. With varying abilities to generate income, they continued to try to make a surplus outside the agrarian sector through petty commodity production and trade.

These Muslim and Sahus aspired to grow their trade and acquire assets, hire wage labour in their shops and businesses, and reinvest profit in the business or in acquiring more businesses

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28 This was in comparison with only 1 OBC or Muslim, who in fact was not a person who came with the expansion of the forestry, but simply a teacher from Bihar who was posted into the local school and decided to retire in the cool climate of the hills.

29 All of these required a degree of literacy (for instance, supervision of the building of a pond or a road or a school), but more than anything the development of personal charisma and social skills to go to the Block and District Administrative offices and negotiate with officials.
(albeit rarely in agriculture). Their eventual aim was to accumulate at a rate that would allow for the purchase of property in the urban centres – the district capital was the first destination for upward mobility. However, in this region only 3 per cent of the households were able to seriously consider this position. Moreover, only less than 10 per cent of the total household population of the area could even contemplate becoming petty commodity producers who could comfortably educate their children in the local school and did not have to worry about medical costs at times of ill-health (this included 28 per cent of the Sahu households and 12 per cent of the Muslim households).

Most of the Muslims and Sahus households, in fact slipped into increasing impoverishment as petty commodity producers who were totally reliant on family labour, and joined their struggling kin as their businesses struggled to reproduce and they found it difficult to make ends meet. Thirteen per cent of the total households in the region became this kind of marginal petty commodity producer, and this included 53 per cent of the Sahu households and 33 per cent of the Muslim households.

Some, in fact, resorted to wage labour in the non-agrarian sector (17 per cent of Sahu households and 56 per cent of Muslim households), and sometimes by migrating outside the region (17 per cent of Sahu households and 42 per cent of Muslim households have a history of such migration). It is important to note here, however, as discussed in greater detail below, that the Sahus, as a marker of their higher caste status, would not engage in the lowest and most vulnerable of wage labour even if they were more impoverished than many Dalits and Adivasis who did.

The Dalits turned from working in the forests to seasonally migrating outside the region to Gujarat, Haryana, Bihar and West Bengal (Tripura is a new destination) to brick factories and the construction industry – and sometimes to the agricultural plains of those states. Seventy-one per cent of all Dalit households migrated as this seasonal casual manual labour. Their landlessness and their reliance on very risky and poorly paid wage labour meant that the Dalits remained the worst off of all the social groups in the region.

In understanding a household’s ability to reproduce through the above processes, we may identify four different types of households in the region as shown in Figure 2. The criteria for classification emerge from intense ethnographic observations described above, paying attention to the patterns of household reproduction in the area which were not based on income alone but on the degree to which households were likely to become indebted, simply reproduce or accumulate wealth (and how), and on the relative precariousness/security of the work in which they were engaged, as well as the local status attached to this work.

More than 80 per cent of the region’s entire population consisted of households that were struggling to reproduce themselves (almost 100 per cent of the Dalit, Bhuiya and Kherwars; more than 75 per cent of the Oraon, Lohra and Muslims; and 44 per cent of the

30 These higher castes and Muslims generally did not like to participate in manual wage labour (considering it as less dignified than running some petty business) but were often compelled to.
31 About half were landless and the other half had less than 1 hectare of land.
32 Limited parallels could be drawn with the ‘classes of labour’ concept, which Lerche (2010) takes from Bernstein (2008) to analyse the segmentation amongst labour in India. (For Bernstein and Lerche, this concept was needed because labouring people encompassed the classical wage workers, depending entirely on the sale of their labour power, plus those who pursued their reproduction through casual, insecure and oppressive wage employment and/or complex combinations of employment and self-employment – including farming – which was just as precarious and insecure. Lerche (2011) identified the ‘classes of labour’ on the basis of different types of employment and degrees of self-employment, ordered by levels of remuneration and protection, and also by a hierarchy of powerlessness.)

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Sahu OBC households). They were either landless or had a negligible amount of land. They were extremely vulnerable to indebtedness. They found it hard to survive on subsistence farming, hunter–gathering and the forest economy alone, and engaged in migrant wage labour or petty production.

There is a marked social segmentation by caste in how these households reproduced themselves. Only the Dalits, Adivasis and low-caste Muslims migrated as seasonal casual wage labour, where the terms and conditions of work and pay were at the lowest end of the scale. This migration was to other states in India to work in the construction industry in brick factories and in agriculture (Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana in particular). They were manual unskilled labour in the informal economy, engaged in heavy work (mainly lifting and loading) in risky environments and paid at piece rates. (Central and eastern India are, of course, noted reservoirs of seasonal migrant labour for the rest of the Indian economy.)

Higher-caste Muslims and Sahus who were also struggling to survive, however, differentiated themselves from the low castes by not engaging in this backbreaking work, which offered very low remuneration. They either preferred to engage in some kind of petty commodity production or they undertook a second category of wage work, which was in a marginally better environment and with slightly better terms of pay. Amongst migrant labour, this usually meant semi-skilled wage work in the construction industry (as a welder, bricklayer or electrician, for instance). Here, they were paid a monthly salary (rather than payment at piece rates). They also had better accommodation, with basic electricity, water and provision of fans (than the slums in which most Adivasis and Dalits lived when they migrated). In the villages, this work could involve being a jeep driver or conductor or working as a shop hand. These households also engaged in the better-paid labour in the forest economy (the collection of *kendu* leaves in particular) but would not involve themselves in heavy labour that offered low remuneration (e.g. the collection of *mohallan* leaves).

Figure 2 The percentage of households, in relation to reproduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reproducing and Accumulating</th>
<th>Reproducing</th>
<th>Just Managing to Reproduce</th>
<th>Struggling to Reproduce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33 Forty-eight per cent of households in this region have some history of seasonal casual labour migration.
34 Yet they may have engaged in wage labour on government development schemes and through NREGS, as these were better paid and did not, from their perspective, involve the same degree of compromise in dignity as poorly paid manual labour.

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Households just managing to reproduce themselves accounted for 10 per cent of the population in the region. Sahu households were proportionally greater in numbers in this category. But there were also a few Muslim and Adivasi Lohra and Oraon households. None of these households engaged in the most risky and lowly paid of wage labour, but could participate in that which was better paid and more skilled. Most of the Muslim and high castes in this category were in fact petty producers. Most of the Adivasis in this category had enough land to survive on farming and hunter–gathering (they were those who were better educated, and who sought to differentiate themselves from their poorer kin by not engaging in the lowest forms of wage labour). Some of the Adivasi households in this category (7 per cent of the total Oraon houses) were anganwadi sevikas, sahikas (health workers), para-teachers and home guards – posts that were reserved for Adivasis. (Although these were government-sector jobs they were comparable to the second category of wage labour as the jobs were insecure, the pay was exceedingly low relative to the needs for household reproduction, and there were no effective rights to social security).

Households reproducing themselves, who earned just enough money to reinvest in their business, made up only about 6 per cent of the total households. Sahus were proportionally better represented than any other group in this category, but there were also some Muslim households as well as very few Adivasi Lohra and Oraon ones. They would generally not engage in wage labour at all unless it was for their own fields or businesses. They were either the larger landholders and/or those whose businesses were doing well – for instance, a shop owner, a restauranteur, a quack, the owner of a jeep for public transport or a petty contractor of forest products. Most of their money was from trade, but a part of it might be from surplus labour: they sometimes employed labour – for instance, shop help, a driver or a restaurant waiter. Households that had a government employee earning a good salary also usually fell in this category (this included 8 per cent of the Oraons, 4 per cent of the Lohras and 3 per cent of the Sahu houses – the latter two actually amount to only one household each).

Households reproducing and accumulating accounted for less than 3 per cent of the total population and included Sahu, Muslim and Oraon households. They would not engage in wage labour. They were traders and entrepreneurs and generally owned more than one business (e.g. a PDS dealership, trade in non-timber forest products and a jeep). They had enough money to invest in property in the urban centres. Their surplus was from trade, but also could be from accumulation through the employment of one or two wage labourers.

To summarize this section, it is important to note a number of points in considering the differential ability and means of these households to reproduce themselves. First, more than 80 per cent of the households, and across all social groups, were really struggling to reproduce themselves and they were doing so via a variety of means: subsistence farming, hunter–gathering, wage work and petty commodity production. There were no ‘pure’ types here. Second, there was only very limited class differentiation taking place in the area – just 10 per

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35 Those who buy non-timber forest products, such as kendu leaves, from the wage labourers were traders for the government. In theory, the process worked as follows: the government owned the forests and paid labour to collect the leaves, which it would then sell on for the making of bidis (cigarettes). To facilitate this process, the government opened up tenders and invited contractors to collect the leaves. Successful contractors thus paid a royalty to the government (based on the amount of leaves that the government expects to collect from the area) and earned the license to trade in the area. (Of course, there was an informal economy to this process whereby the contractors collected more than the expected amount and the surplus was based on the labour of the Adivasis. However, these economies, as well as Maoist involvement in these markets of protection, will have to be the subject of another paper.)

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cent of the population were able to reproduce themselves comfortably and within that only 3
per cent could actually accumulate for reinvestment. Third, in the processes of this limited
class differentiation, the state played the most significant role by enabling the accumulation of
surplus in the non-agrarian sector. And fourth, capitalist relations of production in agriculture
had a negligible role in processes of differentiation. Even amongst the well-off households,
accumulation rarely took place through agriculture; and as a corollary, investment in agricul-
ture was negligible. Any investment was in business or property in the urban centre and
district capital, in the hope that the household’s new generations might have better access to
educational facilities and to working in the professional and bureaucratic sector. So in these
regions, the agrarian question of capital (the development of a surplus in the agrarian sector
for investment) seems to have been bypassed, as argued by Bernstein (1996), and the role of
the state has been very significant in this transition. Nevertheless, in the context of the
capitalist development that is proceeding here, which cannot provide an adequate or secure
material existence to the majority of the population, the agrarian question of the working
masses (the proletarian and poor peasants) remains and will need to be addressed in all their
struggles.

SOME THOUGHTS BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Commenting on the Indian modes of production debates of the 1970s, Harry Cleaver noted
that the debates for the most part were ‘couched in the language and style of academic
Marxism, and the political positions of the participants . . . often remain veiled’ (Cleaver 1976,
A2). He observed then that, in fact, the agrarian ‘question is raised today for the same reason
it has been raised repeatedly over the last 40 years – because the struggles of the rural peoples
of the Third World have put it on the agenda’ (ibid.). A further 40 years later, the agrarian
question was alive in India for the very reasons that Engels put it on the agenda in 1894 (see
Engels 1950 [1894]): in the absence of the differentiation of polar classes, what kinds of
alliances need to be formed, and what should be the strategy of the Indian revolutionary
struggle? These are the questions that trouble some of my Maoist respondents.

Byres (1986), developing the perspectives of Lenin, long ago laid out that there was no
standard, unilinear or inevitable path of the transition to capitalism, showing the differences
between the English, the Prussian, the French, the American, the Japanese, the Taiwanese, the
South Korean and so on. Yet it is surprising how the Indian Left so closely relied on the
English model as their benchmark. It is, of course, possible that there are many different
agrarian transitions in India. And that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the plains of
central Bihar, where Party Unity tried to re-establish Marxism–Leninism, and in Telangana,
where People’s War pursued a similar project, the struggle against landlordism and semi-
feudal/semi-colonial relations may, at one time, have been the most pertinent struggle in those
regions.

But what about the hills and forests of Adivasi-dominated India, where the Maoists now
have their guerrilla zones? What kind of agrarian transition is under way there? These are
regions that are quite different to that which Mao imagined of China: they are not areas of
semi-feudalism. Nor are they areas in which capitalist relations dominated the agrarian transi-
tion, though capitalism penetrated through circuits of exchange. In this paper, I have tried to
show that it is in fact difficult to sustain the argument that feudal relations were ever
established in these Maoist guerrilla zones of eastern India. The problems of establishing
settled agriculture in these forested and hilly tracts meant that land revenue collection and
settlement did not follow the more familiar paths of zamindari common in other areas of Permanent Settlement. Some settled agriculture was encouraged with the reservation of the forests and the in-migration of higher-caste Hindus (OBCs) and Muslims, but these newcomers, who were mainly traders in the forest economy, did not invest in agriculture. In this zone, the Maoist slogan 'land to the tiller' appears to bear little relevance.

It is, of course, difficult for this paper to extend the same conclusion to other areas, although we may note two points. First, this analysis, based on the Adivasi-dominated hills and forested areas of Jharkhand, is likely to provide similar results in other such Adivasi-dominated areas of central and eastern India in Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Maharashtra. Second, it seems that it may be difficult now for any scholar with serious field evidence to argue for the persistence of semi-feudal relations, even in the original areas of Naxalite struggle in the agricultural plains, such as those of Bihar. Rodgers and Rodgers (2001), for instance, once argued that in 1981 the two villages they studied in Kasba block, Purnia district, Bihar were well captured by the model of semi-feudalism set out by Prasad for Bihar (unequal land distribution, tenancy, a mix of attached and casual labour and indebtedness – a situation in which the elite had little interest in development and change, which could undermine the dependency and control on which the pattern of distribution rested, thus seriously limiting investment in agriculture). However, in re-studying the villages in 1999, they were struck by the substantial increase in seasonal casual labour migration which had encouraged a significant monetization of the economy, a situation in which they argue, 'semi-feudalism meets the market'. Thus while in Adivasi-dominated forested regions such as the one discussed here, feudal relations could never take hold, it seems that in the plains they have become weaker over time and virtually disappeared. This situation suggests that the primary contradiction as that between feudalism and the broad masses is not valid and the traditional land question around the slogan 'land to the tiller' cannot be the fulcrum of radical change today (see also Basu and Das, Harriss, and Lerche, this issue).

Although 'land to the tiller' may have little relevance, as this paper has also shown, it cannot be argued that capitalist production relations dominate agriculture in the Adivasi-dominated forests and hills. Agricultural investment throughout the region, and across caste groups, was minimal: Green Revolution technology was notoriously absent. Agriculture was primarily for subsistence. The Muslims and Sahus who came to the area by state-driven forestry programs as petty commodity producers continued to struggle to reproduce, some even being compelled to take up wage labour. As they did when they first arrived in the region, Dalits also primarily reproduced themselves through wage labour. Amongst the majority of the population who had a long history in the area (the Adivasis), hunter–gathering and subsistence agriculture is accompanied by wage labour in the non-agrarian sector (either locally or by seasonally migrating to other states in India). We have here the complex reproduction of households in which people are not selling or giving up their land, but trying to reproduce

36 Whitehead (pers. comm.) has suggested that in the Khandesh too, agriculture was more or less for subsistence.
37 The land question has, of course, been said to be resurrected by the Maoists in a different fashion – in relation to struggles against the processes of primitive accumulation and the dispossession and displacement faced by Adivasis as a result of multinational companies seizing land for mining and other industrial development. In this region of Jharkhand, however, there was no mining of this sort. And although the Maoists have in very recent years used such struggles against dispossession and displacement in their political propaganda, I am sceptical of the all too common direct relationship between land acquisition for development and recruitment into the Maoist movement, which it seems to me – even in Adivasi areas – has a much longer history then these recent representations of struggles.
through a mix of subsistence farming, hunter–gathering and wage labour amidst a situation in which agricultural and forest conditions are so poor that their returns are now insufficient for social reproduction.

One of the greatest challenges that face the Maoists is how to account for the complex reproduction of households in their political struggles. While 64 per cent of the Indian labour force is still employed in agriculture, notions of a simple peasantry, if there ever was one, are difficult to hold. The categories that the Maoists used – ‘small peasant’, ‘middle peasant’, ‘big peasant’ – do not capture the complexity of means of household reproduction. There is no simple peasantry here; households are reproducing through a complex mix of farming and wage work in the non-agrarian economy, in which the seasonal migration of casual labour to distant destinations is extremely important. Recent estimates suggest that up to 50 million Indians are on the move as seasonal migrant labour, though others have suggested that the numbers could be double that figure.\(^3\) The Maoist strategy and tactics (2004b) are relatively silent on the importance of migrant seasonal casual wage labour and the difficulty of reproducing without it, not only in India but also across their guerrilla zones. They pay little attention to the significance of migrant labour in the analysis of the Indian agrarian economy; nor did they think through the political ramifications of this migration. Moreover, while capitalist relations are not dominating in agriculture, integration into commodity relations is crucial for the Adivasi populations who once relied on subsistence agriculture and hunter–gathering, and for whom non-agrarian wage labour is now significant for reproduction.

How does one proceed with class struggle in a region that is not semi-feudal, but in which capitalist relations in agriculture are also not pertinent? Who is the ‘enemy’? And what about Engel’s original question: What kinds of alliances should be formed? The Maoists ended up in these hilly and forested regions as a result of the military needs of the war – repression in the plains resulted in the search for better terrain for guerrilla warfare. Perhaps, as I had done as an anthropologist when I arrived, their leaders also first initially set about in vain looking for feudal relations in order to mobilize their struggle. Although capitalist relations in agriculture are not the main driver, class differentiation is very slowly taking place in the area. I have proposed here that contrary to the well-versed theories of the development of capitalism in agriculture, or those of internal colonialism, which attribute class differentiation to the workings of global capital, it is the processes of colonial and postcolonial state formation itself which have had a very influential role in driving class differentiation in these regions.

It was the state that brought in the outsiders in the early part of the nineteenth century, who then introduced a market economy and petty commodity production. It was the state that, in recent years, promoted education amongst the local population and created a few government-sector jobs reserved for Adivasis. It was the state that was creating wage work in the local economy. It was the state that was promoting petty contractorships and the related black economy around development schemes. The state was playing a driving role in sowing the seeds of class differentiation in these forests and hills in Jharkhand.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that while at one level the Maoists reproduced the flexibility of their tactics and – in lieu of an anti-feudal struggle in these areas – organized

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\(^3\) Breman (2009) suggested that the estimate is 50 million, though others such as John Harriss (in the India-China British Academy conference held in London in November 2011) have suggested that the numbers could be 100 million.
their local struggles against the Indian state, at another level they also perhaps inadvertently acted as an arm of the postcolonial state and enhanced the processes of class differentiation it generated.

To outline the struggles against the Indian state first: one of the first moves that the Maoists made in the area was to chase away all the forest officers (their jeeps and trucks were burnt and their rest houses bombed), destroying their collaboration with outside contractors illegally felling trees in the area. The dominant face of the Indian state in these forests and hills at that time was the forest officers. Mobilization against these exploitative officers and their alliance with outside contractors who left with truckloads of illegally felled timber, thereby looting people of their resources, generated much support amongst locals, as it allowed them better access to the Reserved Forests. Forest officers had for years been extremely punitive when the local populations attempted to take firewood, bamboo and wood for the building of their houses, or even when they tried to graze goats in the Reserved Forests. When the Maoists arrived, they set their own rules for the use of forests so that free grazing was allowed everywhere, firewood for household consumption was no longer prohibited and village committees were allowed to give permission to procure wood for building houses. The Maoists also raised wages in the collection of forest products – the kendu leaf in particular – so that wages in Maoist areas were double that of areas where Maoists were not present. In these struggles, the Maoists attempted to form a broad alliance with all the people living in the area – across all the castes, taking into account that there was little class differentiation between the various groups living in the area (this is quite contrary to how many populist commentators have painted the movement – as a movement solely of indigenous people, as an Adivasi struggle: for a critique, see Shah 2012).

At the same time as chasing out certain arms of the state, however, the Maoists allowed a greater penetration of the state and this enabled the resulting processes of class differentiation. For instance, the Maoists democratized the award of petty contracts in the sale of non-timber forest products, which – although it broke the monopoly of outside contractor-forester links – led to increasing class differentiation in the area through the development of local contractors, who now ran the ‘markets of protection’ (Shah 2006), in which the state was a crucial player. Moreover, almost all the recent Maoist tactics in the area have focused on organizing people against state policies. While this has included organizing against police repression and abstract notions such as privatization, liberalization, corruption and rising prices, it has also included making concrete demands off the state – such as not just 100 days, but 365 days of employment to be guaranteed under NREGS. Through such demands, the Maoists have ironically brought the state closer in people’s imaginaries in areas where many Adivasis have historically sought to ‘keep the state away’ (Shah 2007). And, moreover, the military attention that the Maoists have generated from the Indian state has initiated both the recruitment of locals into the Indian security forces as well as expansion of the development arms of the state in the Maoist areas. Thus the Maoists have actually inadvertently enhanced the presence of the state, brought it closer to the people of the area,

39 The CPI(Maoist) strategy and tactics (2004b) reflects Byres’ thesis of uneven development but notes that the strategy of the Indian revolution, based on the principal contradiction as being between feudalism and the broad masses, remains the same throughout the country. Regional differences in economic, political, social and cultural development in the country, together with the differences in the intensity of class struggle, remain the subject of formulating appropriate tactics (that is, forms of struggle and forms of organization) and political slogans, but do not affect the strategy. Indeed, while the Party Programme (2004a) and Strategy and Tactics (2004b) may paint a different picture of the primary contradictions in Indian society, in these regions, reflecting the flexibility in tactics, it was the Indian state against which the Maoists mobilized their struggle.
and as a result increased the process of class differentiation through state activity in the region.

One wonders, then, whether more effective Maoist tactical measures in these areas would have been to pay attention to firmer anti-state politics and to proactively explore how alternative socio-economic and political structures could be built on pre-existing tribal sacral polities. Adivasi areas, as I have argued, have had alternative systems of labour exchange as well as alternative notions of democracy (Shah 2010). However, the Maoist teleological vision of revolutionary development inhibited them from creatively considering how these alternative orders could be built on for their imaginings of a socialist future: for the Maoists, these Adivasi polities were simply a residue of pre-capitalist relations that would have to fade away. This is not to argue that Adivasi socio-economic–political structures can provide the basis for an all-India revolutionary strategy and tactics. However, it is to suggest that alongside the radical rethinking that needs to be reinvigorated in the revolutionary Left on the agrarian question in India, greater sensitivity to the historical specificity of the political economy of particular regions and their related political potential would not go astray.

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