

Reading Adivasi Histories: Tana Bhagats in Colonial and Postcolonial Times

Sangeeta Dasgupta
Centre for Historical Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

PROLOGUE

There were poignant moments during my visits to Ranchi, Lohardagga and Gumla, as I toured across the year 2012 some of the scattered pockets of Jharkhand where the rumbles of the Tana Bhagat movement can still be heard. I squirmed as my interlocutor, Sunitaji, who has been working for years amongst the Tana Bhagats and is now a member of the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, introduced me: '*Didi Dillise aii hai. Bohut bara university me parati hai. Didi ek kitab likh rahi hai Tana Bhagat andoloan ke upar. Apna kahani batao. Didi ke prashn ka jawab do*' (The elder sister has come from Delhi. She teaches in a very big university. She is writing a book on the Tana Bhagat movement. Tell her your story. Answer her questions). Delhi... University...*Kitab* (book)...Words that reinforced that distance between my informants and me which texts in critical anthropology had repeatedly alerted me to. '*Hum apse janne key liye aye hai*' (I have come to learn from you), I hesitantly broke in. But Suktara Tana Bhagat, my octogenarian Tana informant, was not to be outdone; he inverted the unequal relationship between us in a moment. People from Delhi had visited him earlier too: they had come to him for information and guidance since they had wanted to make a film on the Tana Bhagats. He too had visited Delhi as part of a Tana delegation. Delhi, then, was not so remote for him, nor were we as researchers who wrote books or made films! But as I interacted with the Tana Bhagats, trying to understand adivasi movements in colonial and post-colonial times and thinking through the links between events/enactments, history, and the art of remembering and telling, I thought I should, as many of them had urged, tell their story. Though not as they would necessarily have liked me to tell it.

INTRODUCTION

A twenty-five-year-old youth, Jatra Oraon of Gumla, Ranchi, proclaimed in April 1914 that he had received a divine message from Dharmes, the God of the Oraons. Jatra was to be a king and his followers, the Tana Bhagats, were to share the kingdom. All those who did not join the movement, Jatra prophesied, would be struck dumb. Reciting what he claimed to be were divinely inspired *mantras* (devotional verses), Jatra advocated that Oraon religion should be freed of evils like ghost-finding and exorcism, belief in *bhuts* (spirits), animal sacrifice and drinking.¹ His followers were to work no more as coolies or labourers; they were also to break the ploughs and stop the payment of rent to landlords.² Ploughing fields entailed cruelty to cows and oxen, and had failed to save the Oraons from famine and poverty. God would provide for them, and a single grain of rice would satisfy a person's hunger. One or two small quadrangles were sufficient for the maintenance of an entire family: a handful of rice grains, if scattered on the land, would produce enough to fill a grain attic.³ Because of the impending destruction of the world when earthly possessions would be the only hindrances, disciples of the faith were asked to purify themselves by discarding household equipments, agricultural implements and ornaments into the river.⁴

Almost a hundred years has lapsed since then, and a hundred years is a long time. On October 1 and 2, 2012, I was in Bishunpur, Gumla, to witness what is today, for many, the most important event in the Tana calendar. On October 1, in the remote village of Chingri in Bishunpur where Jatra Bhagat was born, and under his statue that had been erected in the 1989, about a hundred Tana Bhagats had assembled in the moonlit night. The chants of their *mantras* and the sound of the conch-shells pierced the stillness of the night; the smell of *dhup* (incense) was overpowering; the smoke made vision hazy. Clad in white sarees or *kurtas* (long shirts) made of *khadi* (hand-spun) cloth if they could afford it, and of synthetic if they could not, often with a Gandhi

¹ S. C. Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs* (Ranchi: 1928), p. 341.

² Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 54 of 1925.

³ A. John, 'Eine Reise nach Chechari' [A Journey to Chechari], *Die Biene auf dem Missions-felde fur Missions-freunde und Missions Vereine*, No. 1, January. 1928, p. 64. This journal was the annual missionary journal of the German Evangelical Lutheran Mission (later renamed the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission).

⁴ W. Dehmlow, 'Ein falscher Prophet in Bahar-Barwe' [A False Prophet in Bahar-Barwe], *Die Biene auf dem Missionsfelde*, No. 11, November, 1914, p. 151.

topi (cap) on their heads, wearing a *janeu* (sacred thread) or a thread around their necks, they clapped their hands as they chanted their invocations in obeisance to Jatra and Gandhi. As the chanting continued, some of the women got possessed. With their heads shaking, they bent before the image as they continued with the singing. On the following day, the birth anniversary of Gandhi, Gandhi Baba, the once-living and now deemed to be a powerful deity, was to be worshipped by them. The Tana Bhagats assembled at the same point in the morning; I was now familiar with the smoke, the smell of incense, the sound of the chanting and the clapping of hands. But this time, below the statue of Jatra Bhagat was placed a portrait of Gandhi. Linked then through this worship is Jatra Bhagat, the founder of the Tana Bhagat movement, with Gandhi, the ‘Father of the nation’.

But there was little sense of the peace and quiet of the former night. On huge loudspeakers, one could hear the blare of patriotic songs from Hindi films, Hindi *bhajans* (devotional songs), and the voice of a member of the Vikas Bharati Bishunpur: ‘The marathon is coming to a close...the winner is coming in...please cheer loudly for him...the others will soon follow...’. The Vikas Bharati, a ‘development agency’ set up in 1983 under the initiative of Ashok Bhagat, Secretary of the organisation and an active ‘social worker’,⁵ with sympathies for the Hindu Right, concerned itself with educational, vocational and health-related interventions for ‘the most neglected and remote communities of the state’.⁶ Every year around this time, as a means of mobilizing the adivasi youth under its fold, the Vikas Bharati organized cultural events, cycle races and marathons. Constructed very near the statue of Jatra Bhagat was a stage on which were huge portraits of Vivekananda, Gandhi and Jatra Bhagat. With bored and disinterested faces, the Tana Bhagats, who were now seated on chairs in the *pandal* (covered space constructed for festivities), sometimes clapped their hands as the participants of the marathon slowly trickled in. Others looked bewildered. The speeches began. Some prominent Tana Bhagat leaders were invited on stage to say a few words. And then spoke Ashok Bhagat: ‘The non-violence

⁵ Vikas Bharati Bishunpur’s ‘2010-11 Annual Report’.

⁶ See ‘Secretary’s Perspective’, *Ibid.*, p. 1.

that the Tana Bhagats preach is what we need today to fight the divisive forces in Jharkhand ...' 'Non-violence' is a Gandhian ideal that the Tana Bhagats claim for themselves, that links their past with Gandhi and that of the Indian nation. By tactically focusing on this, Ashok Bhagat could reconcile Tanas ideals and interests with the stated aim of the Vikas Bharati: to 'engage youths and mobilise them for the contributing to the nation-building and development of Jharkhand'.⁷

The Tana Bhagat movement, then, is still alive, though the demands of the Tana Bhagats are today framed differently. A dwindling and yet visible community of about 10,000 people as they themselves speculate, their movement is fractured from within, with various groups articulating their grievances differently and advocating diverse paths for their agitation. For political parties, this group is numerically insignificant; their demands, although occasionally heard, are largely ignored as unpractical, absurd and beyond the scope of judicial and bureaucratic rationality. For the RSS, the Hindu Right, which is spreading its base amongst the adivasis,⁸ the Tana Bhagats, with their longer history of an opposition to the missionaries and their invoking of Gods and Goddesses from the 'Hindu' pantheon, are ideally suited for the battle against the *ishaiis* (Christians). From among the Tana community, some have tried their hands with electoral politics: Ganga Tana Bhagat was a 'vidhayak' (member of the state legislature) on a Congress ticket who had addressed some of the Tana grievances. The Congress, emphasising the Tana commitment to Gandhi and the Congress, has occasionally given them a hearing; inviting them for visits to Delhi were Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and in September this year, Rahul Gandhi. But there are many others leading their ordinary lives in scattered pockets of Jharkhand. Caught between an almost lost past, a difficult present and an uncertain future, and finding many of their practices economically unviable to sustain,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸ The term most commonly used to replace the category of the 'tribe' is that of 'adivasi', a term that came into use from the 1930s. While both these terms have their respective lineages, and have come into use at different points of time, these are often used interchangeably and taken to be more or less synonymous. [See Introduction, B. G. Karlsson and T. Subba eds, *Indigeneity in India* (London: 2005), p. 2.] I however prefer to use 'adivasi'. [See D.J. Rycroft and S. Dasgupta, 'Indigenous Pasts and the Politics of Belonging' in D.J. Rycroft and S. Dasgupta eds, *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (London and New York: 2011)].

they carry on with their belief in Jatra Bhagat, the Mahatma, the Congress and the *sarkar* in Delhi. ‘Jharkhand has just been formed’, Suktara Tana Bhagat stated; ‘Chhotanagpur and Bharat (India) have existed from the beginning.’

This essay is on the Tana Bhagats in colonial and post-colonial times. I try and make sense of their movement in the colonial period, and then see how far the Tanas relate to the history of their movement – from the archives and as reconstructed by the historian – drawing as they do on the memories of events passed down generations, but carefully reworking these in conjunction with events relevant in the present context. While I have used an explanatory frame drawn from a historical perspective and engaged with the existing historiography on adivasi protest in colonial India, somewhere there is unease as the experiences of the Tana Bhagats cannot always be fitted into the frame of the historian. Indeed, studying adivasi movements only through the frame of the ‘political’ is itself limiting.⁹ By imposing through the flattened language of the ‘modern’ a singularity to events, it erases the multivocal and precludes thereby other possibilities, other voices, other touchstones, through which the Tanas made sense of their world. It gives a meaning to their everyday practices that cannot always be understood with the fair doses of rationality that the discipline of history requires of its practitioners.¹⁰ Rather than tying up my story, I therefore leave loose ends in my narrative recognizing the limits of history as an explanatory mode. Section I pieces together the many different stories of the Tanas and suggests a reading of adivasi resistance in colonial times; Section II analyses the movement in the phase 1914-1919; Section III explores the Tana relation with the Congress in the period following 1920; Section IV looks at the multiple ways in which the Tanas viewed their movement in post-colonial times. But my intention in following a chronological divide is not to etch out differences between phases as most historians have done while analysing the Tana Bhagat movement, but to argue against this.

⁹ See, for example, R. Guha’s statement: ‘For there was nothing in the militant movements of its (India’s) rural masses that was not political’ in R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: 1983), p.6.

¹⁰ D. Chakrabarty, ‘Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts’ in his *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: 2000), pp. 97-116.

I

THEIR STORIES IN COLONIAL TIMES

The Tana Bhagat movement in the official history of the state of Jharkhand is represented as follows: the first phase, initiated by Jatra Oraon in 1914, and later spear-headed by Sibhu Oraon in 1919, was part of a wider history of agrarian discontent in Jharkhand against the imposition of *begari* (forced labour) and the illegal enhancement of rent by the zamindars and *illaquadars* (intermediary tenure-holders), abetted by the intervention of the colonial state. The Tana movement was thus an episode in a series of agrarian agitations — the Kol agitation, the Sardar *larai* (assertion) and the Birsa Munda uprising — directed against ‘outsiders’ who had staked their claim over the coveted lands of Chhotanagpur. However, unlike the iconic figures of Sido and Kanhu Murmu or Birsa Munda, who have been immortalised in Jharkhand’s history for their ‘violent’ forms of resistance, the Tana Bhagats were seen to be primarily religious and peaceful. Experiences that were contradictory, or did not fit in with the depiction of the Tana having been inevitably non-violent, were ignored and pushed away from this meta-narrative. By 1921, this ‘non-violent’ movement joined Gandhi’s struggle for independence. The Tana Bhagats now are part of another history: the appeal of the Congress and Gandhi to the adivasi population as they strived, as part of the ‘nation’, for the attainment of *swaraj*.¹¹ This narrative, then, tells a grand story, a story about the heroic Tana Bhagats upholding the interests of Chhotanagpur and the state of Jharkhand, and later, that of the Indian nation.

And yet, if we look at the events of the movement culled from a variety of sources - official correspondence, ethnographic reports and anthropological accounts, and missionary writings – we get stories of the Tana Bhagats that are often different. I move then to these stories.

¹¹ www.ranchi.nic.in/hiostory.htm, accessed on 11.12.2012.

As the Tana faith spread under Jatra, followers began to learn the *mantras* and then returned to their respective villages to set up chains of communication. In order to purge Oraon society of the *bhuts*, young Oraon men gathered after their evening meal at the boundary of the village. Arranging themselves in a circle, folding their hands as in prayer, keeping time by clapping their hands and lifting each leg alternatively, they would, with heads shaking, chant their invocations and urge the spirits to go away. At times they would kneel down and just shake their heads. The movement soon reached the districts of Palamau and Hazaribagh. *Dallias* (messengers) from Ranchi visited villages in Palamau and began to organise meetings at night. Their *mantras*, which had originally referred only to ghosts, soon came to include Babhans (dominant caste in Bihar), Musalmans and the English in their list of evils. As in Ranchi, the attack was against the zamindars: their servants were beaten and turned out of jungles when they attempted to collect wood.

In 1918, a ‘rebellion’ of Oraons and Kishans¹² broke out at Jamirapat in Sirguja; colonial officials linked this to the Tana Bhagat movement that had now spread to the states of Sirguja, Udaipur, Jashpur and Korea in 1916. The villagers in Sirguja, after taking a bath in the evening, would gather at a secluded spot where they would sing Tana songs in chorus, and write on slates. Preachers advised the followers to give up tilling of land since crops of a single plot of land would be sufficient for the entire Oraon and Kishan population; abstinence from alcohol and meat was advocated. In the impending battle that was predicted by the Kishans and the Oraons, the Maharajah of the state would be defeated; bullets would melt into water in barrels, swords would twist in the hands of soldiers; Brahmins and Muslims would be killed. As the Oraons and Kisans marched towards Jamirapat, enemies were killed, villages were looted and grains collected.¹³

In 1919, Sibu Oraon, who emerged as the new leader of the Tana Bhagats, stated that he had been instructed by *Bhagwan* (God) to leave his home and family and wander

¹² Roy writes, ‘In the Orissa states...the Oraons describe themselves as Kisans, cultivators...’. See S.C. Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur* (Ranchi, 1915, reprint, Calcutta, 1984), p. 13.

¹³ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Police Branch, File No. p-5R-3 of 1919.

over the world in order to reform it. The Raj (kingdom) was shortly to be restored to the Oraons. *Bhagwan*, Sibū claimed, would send him letters. Pieces of foolscap in Hindi, distributed to the police, expressed some of Sibū's ideas. The Brahmans, Rajputs, *baniyas* (moneylenders), Marwaris and Mussalmans were targets, as were the vagabonds and prostitutes who would perish during *Phalgun*, the time of the Holi festival. Christians were the lowest class since God had said so.¹⁴ It was no longer the Raj of the zamindars who had nothing to eat when they came, but were now so powerful as to beat the Oraons and Mundas. Since the earth belonged to pious men, the Oraons need not work since *Bhagwan* would feed them; no rent or *chaukidari* (for the watchman) tax was required to be paid. Sibū was reported to have said that hands and legs of all the people except the Oraons would be cut down.¹⁵

As Tana Bhagats from Ranchi, Palamau and Hazaribagh, under the leadership of Sibū Bhagat, congregated in the jungles of the Satpahari Hills of Hazaribagh in 1920, they abandoned their cattle, fields and homes and performed their Dharam (religion) in the jungles of Hazaribagh, waiting for their saviour or the deity to arrive.¹⁶ Satpahari was declared to be the site for pilgrimage where religious duties were to be performed. When the deity did not arrive, Sibū stated that the Tanas Bhagats were no longer required to observe any restrictions of food and behaviour. As children of the soil, they had equal rights to production from land; the government should ensure that they would get 'Adh Batai' from zamindars, both Hindus and Muslims.¹⁷ The zamindars were to provide *rasad* (grain levies/provisions) for Sibū's *paltan* (army). Tana Bhagats now refused to pay the zamindar *harai* (a plough and a ploughman for a day to cultivate the land of a zamindar) and *bankatti* (tax of eight annas per house) for grazing their cattle in the jungle and taking fuel from it. Referring to themselves as Ravana Putru, or the descendants of the legendary king of Lanka, Ravana, the Tana Bhagats believed that a Sibū had given their kingdom to the British on the promise that it would be returned to them; now, Sibū Bhagat, the Tana leader, wanted the promise to be redeemed. If

¹⁴ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 86 of 1919.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 313 of 1920.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

zamindars, mahajans (money-lenders) and the police had oppressed the Tana Bhagats, despite their present hardships, the Tanas would soon be the masters of their country and eat off gold plates.¹⁸

From 1921, as the Non-cooperation movement launched by the Congress against the British spread to Ranchi, fresh injunctions were added to the Tana tenets: followers were to carry the Congress *jhanda* (flag), wear *khaddar* and take vows in Gandhi Maharaj's name. Lores, myths and rumours grew around Gandhi, his *charkha* (spinning wheel) and *swaraj* (self-rule). Tana Bhagats were now drawn into the organizational fold of the Congress: they became members by paying four-*annas* (one-fourth of a rupee), attended the Congress annual sessions at Gaya and Ramgarh, participated in processions and at *hartals* (strikes), collected subscriptions, organized *panchayats* (assemblies), supported the non-co-operation *thanas* (police-stations), and spun the *charkha*. In the *swaraj* of Gandhi, land would be rent-free: Tana Bhagats refused to pay rent to the zamindars and forcibly ploughed the land when it was sold for arrears.¹⁹

By the late 1930s, references to the Tanas become infrequent in official records as the political scenario was marked by the opposition between the Congress and the Adibasi Sabha, the separation of Chhotanagpur from Bihar being the subject of contention.²⁰ Once the focus of enquiry of the colonial administrators shifted to the threat posed by the Adibasi Sabha, the Tana Bhagats, if mentioned, are seen as objects appended to the Congress.

What sense did colonial officers and missionaries make of the Tana Bhagats as they pieced their story together? As the 'unrest' was analysed, some saw Tana 'ideas' as 'a mixture of Bolshevism, Gandhism and idiocy pure and simple'; others declared Jatra

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 50 of 1921.

²⁰ While the Adibasi Sabha under Jaipal Singh advocated the separation of Chhotanagpur from Bihar and emphasized the rights of 'adibasis' in reserved forests, government recruitment, industrial employment and in the Cabinet structure, the Congress, aided by the Sanatan Adibasis under Theble Oraon, opposed the separation of Chhotanagpur and talked of national integration. See Public and Judicial Department, January – June 1938, Bihar's Governors' Reports, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collection (hereafter APAC), No 3136/38.

to be a 'lunatic' who was to be placed under the observation of the Civil Surgeon. There was however a recurrent motif as the British searched for 'causes': Chhotanagpur had experienced disturbances of an anti-landlord character in almost every decade of the nineteenth century; the Tana Bhagat movement was a continuation of this history.

A study of the Tana movement, I argue, unsettles many of the assumptions that operate in the study of adivasi protest in colonial India, a field that emerged from the 1960s when there was an attempt by those like K.S. Singh to restore the 'tribals' to their 'rightful place' in Indian history.²¹ In such writings that operated within the rhetoric of modernity, adivasi protest, located within an evolutionary schema, was seen as initially 'millenarian';²² it assumed an 'agrarian' dimension with colonial intervention in the land structure; it became 'political' after coming into contact with the national movement.²³ While it was this mode of history writing that the subaltern collective had sought to rectify in the 1980s,²⁴ readings of adivasi protest in the existing historiography, and especially of the Tana Bhagat movement, despite differences in approach, remain constricted by a shared realm of suppositions. Conflict has been read as the resistance of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders', or of adivasis against non-adivasis. The assumption is that while one can identify a sharing of religious and

²¹ One of the earliest attempts however to study these 'incidents and episodes' as 'movements', and not as sporadic acts of violence, appeared in *Man in India* in 1945. (See Rebellion Number, *Man In India*, Vol. 25, 1945). For writings in the 1960s, see K.K. Datta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57* (Calcutta: 1940); J.C. Jha, *Kol Insurrection in Chotanagpur* (Calcutta: 1964); and K. S. Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist* (Calcutta: 1966). In such writings, adivasi movements were assessed in terms of their contribution to the nation and its making; such movements assumed a political form only after integration with Congress/national politics.

²² Stephen Fuchs was one of the first to use the term 'millenarian'. See S. Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (New York: 1965).

²³ See, for example, K.S. Singh, 'Tribal Peasantry, Millenarianism, Anarchism and Nationalism: A Case Study of the Tana Bhagats in Chotanagpur, 1914-25', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, 1988.

²⁴ Guha talked about the *sarkar*- zamindar - *sauhukar* nexus (Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 8); Hardiman referred to the 'spirit of resistance which incorporated a consciousness of "the adivasi" against the "outsider"' (D. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi* (Delhi: 1987), p. 15); P. Chatterjee, posed a necessary contradiction between 'capital' and 'community' and saw community movements (and in this case adivasi movements) as reflecting the natural solidarity of the community (P. Chatterjee, 'Communities and the Nation' in his *The Nation and its Fragments* (New Delhi: 1993), pp. 220-239)

cultural symbols, the economic interests of these groups were antagonistic.²⁵ Drawing upon some of the arguments of an earlier essay,²⁶ I question this reading of adivasi resistance in colonial India. We need to locate the hierarchies within the Oraon community and the many responses of the Tanas, a marginal group from within the Oraons, to changing historical contexts. Their movement drew upon a longer history of struggle in Chhotanagpur against landlords, moneylenders and the British state; they struggled too with tensions within the Oraon community. The opposition of the Tana Bhagats to the plough and agricultural festivities and their yearning for the forest and shifting agriculture, is thus important. The apparently disparate realms of Tana protest — resistance to the landlords, *baniyas* and the Raj, opposition to the traditional leaders of the Oraon community and to the world of spirits, ritual celebrations and agricultural festivities, and the return to shifting agricultural practices — were, I argue, interlinked. In spaces like Chhotanagpur, where agriculture was less profitable, the attachment to, and dependence on, the forests and the fields were always shifting; this was particularly so for those located on the fringes of society. I argue then, for the need to recognize the fissures within the Oraon community, a community which grappled not only with the difficult terrain of Chhotanagpur - ‘a land of dry climate and dry soil where the agriculturist must work hard to live, a land of rugged hills and stubborn valleys which make people hardy, patient and persevering’²⁷ but also with its vastly differing terrains.

²⁵ K.S. Singh identifies in the Tanas a 'peasant consciousness' (K.S. Singh, 'Tribal Peasantry, Millenarianism, Anarchism and Nationalism: A Case Study of the Tana Bhagats in Chotanagpur, 1914-25', p. 36); B.B Chaudhury finds an economic basis to the 'rebel tribal consciousness' (B. B. Chaudhury, 'The Story of a Tribal Revolt in the Bengal Presidency: The Religion and Politics of the Oraons, 1900-1926', in A. Chakrabarti, (ed.) *Aspects of Socio-economic Changes and Political Awakening in Bengal* (Calcutta: 1989), p. 55); P. P. Mohapatra, drawing upon the juridico-economic language of the colonial state, sees in the 'agrarian regimes in Chotanagpur ... a continuous conflict between landlords and tenants', a 'class struggle' (P. P. Mohapatra, 'Class Conflict and Agrarian Regimes in Chotanagpur, 1860-1950', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 28:1,1991, p. 35).

²⁶ S. Dasgupta, 'Reordering a World: The Tana Bhagat movement in Chhotanagpur, 1914 -19', *Studies in History*, 1999', pp. 1-41.

²⁷ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, p. 44.

II

THE FORESTS AND FIELDS OF CHHOTANAGPUR

Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Palamau, where the Tana Bhagats had begun their movement, and where they continue to practice their faith today, were districts of Chhotanagpur, a land of hills and plateaus, jungles and agricultural fields. It is the physical landscape of Chhotanagpur – blue hills, gneiss rocks and rugged ravines; rivers, hill-streams and picturesque waterfalls; green sal jungles, red laterite newly turned-up soil and sand - all in a riot of colours, purple, blue, yellow, red and green, that captures the imagination of the reader.²⁸ With the wild and the untamed however simultaneously coexisted the ordered: the cultivated and terraced fields, painstakingly cleared by the people from the jungle-lands for cultivation. Those who wrote from a trans-local gaze commented on the ‘extensive hilly tract’ and ‘unhealthy jungles’, and on the extreme barbarity of the hill natives²⁹ Local revenue officers found, in contrast, ‘highly productive and well peopled’ tracts, and ‘aboriginal ryots’ in the stratified society of Chhotanagpur.³⁰ Depictions shifted, then, with the location of the observer, the objective with which he wrote, and of course the terrain that he traversed.

The inhabitants of this differentiated terrain were the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias, those who had, as our sources inform us, arrived in the region through successive migrations from distant lands and who had cleared the jungles for agricultural purposes. The Oraon settlements were largely to the north western and central parts of the plateau where they cleared the jungle and brought it under the plough, while the Mundas shifted to the southern and eastern parts of the plateau. As a wandering people, it is difficult to trace their history. In Oraon tradition, as recorded by Dalton, they had migrated from the western coast of India: some of the elders pointed to

²⁸ See, for example, S.C. Roy, *The Mundas and their Country* (Calcutta: 1912), p. 223 and Colonel Depree, Report Geographical and Statistical, Topographical Survey, 1868, Unpublished, Commissioner’s Record Room, Ranchi.

²⁹ W. Hamilton, *A Geographical Statistical and Historical Description of Hindustan and the Adjacent Countries* (London: 1820), pp. 283-84

³⁰ S.C. Roy reproduces Cuthbert’s report in his ‘Ethnographic investigation in official Records’ in *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. VII, Part IV, 1921, pp. 1-34. Here, see p. 2.

Gujarat as the starting point, others to the Konkan. The Oraons however agreed, Dalton pointed out, that they were for many generations settled on the Rohtas and adjacent hills in the Patna district, and from there had moved to Chhotanagpur. The pattern of Oraon migration had led to differential claims to land.³¹ The pioneer families – nuclear or extended – who had cleared the jungles were the *bhuinhars* who were believed to have held rent-free land; the descendants of these original reclaimers of the soil held privileged tenures and a privileged ritual status over later Oraon settlers. From amongst the *bhuinhars* were chosen the *pahan* (the village-priest), the *pujar* (his helper), and the *mahto* (village headman), those who controlled the Oraon world of spirits, sacrifices and festivities and negotiated on behalf of the Oraons relations with the zamindars and the British state. For their responsibilities, they received privileged lands.³² The subsequent Oraon settlers were called *jeth* ryots and ordinary ryots, depending on whether they were earlier or later settlers.³³ It was to the economically impoverished groups of the non-occupancy ryots and under-ryots that the Tana Bhagats usually belonged.³⁴ Some had worked as *dhangars* or agricultural labourers;³⁵ others searched for an alternative as they escaped as migrant labour to Calcutta or to the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. Interestingly, the first visual image that we have of the Oraons is of the *dhangars* as scavengers in Calcutta.

In the early days of British contact with Chhotanagpur, as colonial documents inform us, the Raja of Chhotanagpur administered the country on the payment of a certain

³¹ In 1827, Cuthbert, Magistrate and Collector of the Zillah of Ramgarh, of which Chhotanagpur was a part, in perhaps the earliest report prepared on ‘the people and the lands in Chota Nagpur’, refers to a highly stratified rural structure. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³² Service tenures held by the *mahto* or the village headman were called *Mahtoi* lands, while those held by the *pahan* were the *dalikatari* and *pahnai* lands. A *bhuinhari khunt* (clan) collectively held *Bhutkheta* lands, or lands dedicated to the worship of *bhuts*. The *pahan* could also hold this land on behalf of the *bhuinhars* for the propitiation of village spirits.

³³ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, p. 66-68.

³⁴ F.A.B. Taylor, *Final Report on Revisional Survey and Settlement in Ranchi 1927-35* (Patna: 1938), p. 42.

³⁵ Sibu's profile, for example, is illustrative. A lad of twenty, he was the son of Riba Oraon who had for his cultivation only one and a half *pawas* (a measure) of land. Formerly, he had worked as a *dhangar* or agricultural labourer in village Batkuri and Supa (See Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 86 of 1919). While addressing the grievances of the Tana Bhagats, a British officer wrote: ‘To prevent trouble in future, I think it might be prudent to examine their position as poor and backward tenants.’ (See Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 313 of 1920.)

amount of revenue to the British. Chhotanagpur was then a part of the province of Behar, included within the British dominion after 1765.³⁶ Relations between the Raja and the British were prone to strains from the very outset. In 1806, Captain Roughsedge, the Commandant of the Ramgarh Battalion, had painted in his letter dated 27 October, 1806, a 'lurid picture of the disorders prevalent in the district, the recalcitrance of the Raja, and the general inefficiency of British control.' The Raja, we are informed, granted land to zamindars and *thikadars* (intermediary tenure-holders) – Muslim and Sikh 'outsiders' who came to Chhotanagpur particularly after the 1820s as horse dealers or shawl and brocade merchants. Contentious relations between the landlord and the ryots in Chhotanagpur thus had a long history. British intervention was steady. In 1809, police *thanas* (stations) were established which were placed under the control of the Magistrate of Ramgarh; in 1823, excise duties, the most important source of revenue in the district, were levied by the British; in 1833, a number of administrative reforms were introduced in the region: a regular system of police and courts was established, and an Agent to the Governor-General was appointed in the region in whom was vested the control over the administration of justice and the collection of revenue. In 1854, after the Commissioner was appointed in place of the Agent, British intervention took the form of legislative enactments for the easy realization of revenue, and for the disposal of revenue suits that would resolve the conflicts between the zamindars on the one hand, and the ryots on the other. The Bhuinhari Act of 1869 was followed by surveys between 1869 and 1880; the survey and settlement operations in Ranchi extended from 1902 to 1910; and the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act was finalized in 1908.³⁷

As colonial administrators recorded the customary rights of landlords and villagers, there was a rise in the price of land, and an increase in the volume of land transactions and the number of registered mortgages. Already, administrative arrangements and juridico-legal structures had ensured closer links between labour, capital and market. Further, once enhancement of rent was disallowed, a demand for *salami* (premium

³⁶The Nawab of Bengal granted the *dewani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the British in 1765.

³⁷For a brief history of the expansion of British power in Chhotanagpur, refer to J. Reid, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Ranchi 1902-10* (Calcutta: 1912), pp. 13-50.

taken by the landlords from the ryots for various purposes) became a means of increasing landlord extraction. Traders and moneylenders or the *mahajans*, *sahus* and *bantias*, zamindars, intermediate tenure-holders and ryots, lawyers and petty traders, entered the credit, tenurial and tenancy markets.³⁸ While zamindars had always been prominent in the land market, the class that emerged as the single most prominent group in the land and credit markets comprised the *sahus* and *bantias*, the professional moneylenders and the village merchants.

For the British, it was important to understand the ‘peculiar land tenures of Chota Nagpur’.³⁹ There had existed in the region older customary and community rights over land which the British had intended to recognise and preserve. Those who exercised these rights were the *bhuinhars*, who served as local informants for the British. Viewed as the representatives of the Oraons, a redressal of their grievances was seen as a step towards establishing amicable relations between ‘zamindars’ and ‘raiyaats’⁴⁰ who, in the British perception of a two-tiered society in Chhotanagpur, were ‘natural and sworn enemies’ with irreconcilably conflicting economic interests. The premise of British intervention in this context, and their identification of the *bhuinhars* as the privileged community among the Oraon ryots, was based on the link that was drawn between claims to land, blood and family on the one hand, and the history of migrations and settlements on the other. Missionaries, who were active in Chhotanagpur, gave support to official argument.⁴¹ Upholding primarily the interests of the *bhuinhars* or ‘the original cultivators and their heirs’ over those of the ‘Gaura (cultivators holding only Rajhas)’, the missionaries asserted that ‘especially the

³⁸ The conflict between the Oraons and the non-Oraons has been discussed in detail in Dasgupta, ‘Reordering a World’, pp. 9-17.

³⁹ Letter No. 11, dated the 22nd May 1880, Ranchi, written by Babu Rakhal Das Halder, Special Commissioner under the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, to the Deputy Commissioner, Lohardugga, Papers Relating to the Chota Nagpur Agrarian Disputes, Vol. 1, Unpublished, p. 42.

⁴⁰ In the agrarian terrain of Chhotanagpur, in addition to the *bhuinhari*, the two other categories of lands identified were the *manjihias* (‘tenures’ of the zamindars) and the *rajhas* (‘tenancies’ of the ryots). See Reid, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Ranchi*, pp. 87-89.

⁴¹ The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission, which arrived at Chhotanagpur in 1845, expanded from the 1860s across Lohardaga, Chainpur, Gumla, Barwe, Biru, Gangpur and Jashpur. [See Rev P. Wagner, *Character Sketch of Rev Ferdinand Hahn* (Guntur, 1913), p. 17.] These areas were later to become important centres of the Tana Bhagat movement.

bhuinhars, and not only the native Christians', were 'fearfully oppressed and wronged in different pergunnahs by many of the jagheerdars and theekadars.' Most of the cases cited in missionary pamphlets and memoranda, and discussed in their meetings and conferences, inevitably centred on *bhuinhars* and their grievances.⁴²

At a time when land was becoming increasingly valuable in Chhotanagpur, particularly in view of a decreasing arable space and the consequent struggle over forest-lands, the *bhuinhars* attempted to control land in order to counter their economic insecurities. As informants of local custom, they could reaffirm their dominance in Oraon society and, at the same time, contest the rights of the zamindars to land. Moreover, in the struggle for *rajhas*, *bhuinhars*, as a privileged community, were in a position to deprive the non-occupancy and under-ryots of their lands. Those who participated directly in the cultivation of their lands could choose to replace these sections by members of their own families. As claims and counterclaims were made and memoranda and petitions that contained 'rambling statements, Kol genealogies and vague assertions' were submitted, Rakhil Das Haldar, Special Commissioner under the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, alluded to the imaginary and often exaggerated pleas of the *bhuinhars* for land:

It is these men that have always been the most outrageous in their demands about lands...It cannot be very far from the truth when I say that, if all the land claimed were added together, the amount would probably exceed the total quantity of cultivated and culturable lands within the pargana of the estate that were brought under the operation of the Act....⁴³

It is important to note here that the *bhuinhars*, as a group, were not undifferentiated. Their claims to land had also resulted in a conflict within the community itself. While some among the *bhuinhars* were unable to cope with the exactions of the zamindars

⁴² See, for example, *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Land Question in Chutia Nagpore and an Attempt to Devise Means for its Solution by the 'Vorstand' of the German Evangelical (Gossner's) Mission in Chutia Nagpur, Most Respectfully Submitted to Her Majesty's Government* (Benaras: 1889), p. 10-11.

⁴³ Letter No. 11, dated 22nd May 1880, Ranchi, from Rakhil Das Haldar, Special Commissioner under the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, to the Deputy Commissioner, Lohardagga, Selections from Ranchi Settlement Papers, p. 47.

and *illaquaders*, there were others who were successful in claiming their lands. A privileged group had emerged from within them that took advantage of a tradition-accorded privileged status and the settlement operations to stake a claim as an upwardly mobile group in Chhotanagpur. The Revisional Survey of Ranchi mentions the emergence of this section within the tribal community: tribal mortgagees were found to be as numerous as tribal mortgagers. The Banking Inquiry Committee's investigators had found in village Tungaon 'all the loans excepting two have been taken from the *munda* or *pahan* raiyats or *bhuinhars* of the village.'⁴⁴ The implicit antagonism of the Tanas towards *bhuinhars* assumes an added significance when we recognise that their movement began around the time of settlement operations.

But within this story of agrarian unrest, I would also like to bring in the forests. Indeed, agrarian history, concerned with productivity and growth, tenancy legislations and credit mechanisms, included within its fold from the 1960s itself, settled agriculturists, precluding thereby the forest and its peoples.⁴⁵ Environmental history, in contrast, which emerged in South Asia since the 1980s, studied adivasis as forest peoples. While Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan,⁴⁶ by introducing the concept of 'agrarian environments', have moved beyond this dichotomy, the point that I seek to make through this essay is somewhat different. In Chhotanagpur, where agriculture was an uncertain means of livelihood for many, the dependence on forests and the fields were ever-shifting; this was particularly so for those located on the peripheries. Land conflict now assumed new forms: Tanas, designated as 'settled agriculturists', often gave up their agricultural practices, homes and cattle, moved towards the forests

⁴⁴ Letter no. 1265, dated 9 July 1929, from the Sub-divisional officer, Khunti, to the Deputy Commissioner, Ranchi, Selections from Revisional Settlement Papers, Unpublished, p. 432.

⁴⁵ Adivasi communities, if studied, were those who, as 'agricultural groups', were 'indistinguishable from the general population'. While the North-East, where shifting cultivation was practiced, was ignored because of its perceived 'relative absence of tribal issues'; Chhotanagpur, in contrast, with its settled agriculturists, emerged as 'the window on this tribal world, the scene of the sharpest interaction of historical forces and of tribal revolts, the most politicised and best known region.' See K.S. Singh, *Tribal Situation in India* (Simla: 1972), p. xvii-xix.

⁴⁶ A. Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan argue for the artificiality of categories and the forms of livelihoods based on them. The strong interdependence between various modes of livelihood, and the radical changes over time in landscape, markets, climate, and human strategies of land defy simplistic distinctions. See A. Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds.), *Social Nature: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India* (New Delhi, 2001), Introduction.

and resisted encroachments of the zamindars into their coveted forest lands. Already a conflict had arisen over the rights to the jungle between the Oraons and the zamindars once administrative efforts of recording the customary rights of landlords and villagers over the forests were initiated.⁴⁷ Confronted with a fragile economy, the Tana attachment to the forests now assumed a new meaning. While the comparatively fertile valleys of the central plateau had provided the Oraon with rice and other cereals, for those living almost at the subsistence level, the jungles provided edible roots, leaves, and fruits that women had gathered.⁴⁸ The bamboos, *sal* trees and wild grass that grew in abundance in the forests provided the material for the construction of houses and supplied wood for domestic and agricultural requirements.⁴⁹ Legends were woven around an imagined past by the Tanas: the degradation of the Oraons was connected to a history of settlement and peasant agriculture. The transformation of Oraons from shifting cultivators to plough agriculturists was seen to have initiated a process of decline, a movement from a state of well-being to a state of impoverishment.⁵⁰ Under the circumstances, the Tana attachment to the forest and its integral role in the rhythm of their life, assumes importance.

To their nomadic state before they settled down as agriculturists, and their links with the forests, Oraon folklore and ritual practices bears testimony. As Hahn records in his *Kurukh Folklore*, the Raja wanted to gift five villages to an Oraon family for a good deed they had performed for the king. The latter however preferred to take a large herd of cattle.⁵¹ The principal religious festival of the Oraons – the Khaddi or the Sarhul – celebrated in spring with *sal* (a variety of a tree) blossoms in the *Sarna* (sacred grove) was, Roy suggests, a festival of hunters and gatherers.⁵² Hunting, as a source of livelihood, had of course been replaced by agriculture by the time the Tana

⁴⁷ Reid, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations*, pp.126-36.

⁴⁸ For an idea of the Oraon's dependence on products of the forest, see V. Ball, *Jungle Life in India or the Journeys and Journals of an Indian Geologist* (London: 1880).

⁴⁹ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ For a detailed discussion of the differences between the myths of the Tana Bhagats and Oraons, see Dasgupta, 'Reordering of Tribal Worlds', pp. 181-87.

⁵¹ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, p. 23

⁵² Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, p. 191.

Bhagats had come together under Jatra Bhagat. Yet, hunting festivals retained their magical power to ensure a successful rice harvest.⁵³ On the day of the Phagua Sendra (Spring Hunt), a member of each family of Oraon cultivators ceremonially drew the plough over the fields.⁵⁴

But Chhotanagpur had a changing landscape: it was a 'patchwork quilt of lands, sown and jungle, pasture and mature forest'.⁵⁵ 'As one travels from the western hills and jungles of the district ...further eastward to the central parts of the plateau', wrote SC Roy in 1915, 'the ruder features of the scenery gradually get softened, bleak ravines give place to cultivable valleys, the forests and hills become less numerous, the surface less broken, the undulations gentler, villages and open fields comparatively more numerous and extensive and the population denser and comparatively more civilized.'⁵⁶ The 'forest' too was 'a mosaic of semi-natural landscapes': old growths and scrub jungles were interspersed with tree-covered savannah and secondary growth'.⁵⁷ In the district of Ranchi, the central and eastern parts were denuded of forests; in this *tanr raj* or the land of bare fields, *patras* or small scrub-jungles of *sal* saplings and other trees were scattered. In contrast, the western and south eastern parts of the district were referred to as the *ban-raj* or the forest kingdom⁵⁸ Where agrarian expansion had almost reached its limits as in central part of the district, where the boundaries of villages through open cultivated country were often unchallenged in subsequent Revenue Surveys, grievances would be couched in agrarian terms: refusals to pay rent, chaukidari tax and offer *begari*, assaults on the zamindar and a forcible cultivation of his lands, antipathy towards the Brahmans, Rajputs, *banias*, Marwaris and Muslims and appeals to the state through the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 227

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁵⁵ M. Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan, (eds.), *India's Environmental History: Colonialism, Modernity and the Nation*, Vol. 2 (Ranikhet: 2012), p. 5.

⁵⁶ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, pp. 36-3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

submission of pamphlets, petitions and memorials went hand in hand with a critique of settled agriculture that veered around the plough and agricultural festivities.

But what then was happening in the jungly and hilly country of Palamau and Hazaribagh, for example, where boundaries could not be demarcated accurately, where so intertwined were the two landscapes of the forests and the fields, and so continually shifting its boundaries, that classifying lands through the standardised patterns of the survey and settlement operations failed? As the Director of Land Record and Surveys reported at the time of the Revisional Survey operations in Palamau, 'Between the jungle and the hill areas intervening between the two villages, nobody bothered about exact demarcation, and if the expenses of the survey were to be kept down, rough and ready lines approximating to the general run of the boundary were considered to be sufficiently accurate.'⁵⁹ In such areas, Tana Bhagats refused not only to pay the zamindar *harai* (a plough and a ploughman for a day to cultivate the land of a zamindar) but also *bankatti* (tax of eight annas per house) for grazing their cattle in the jungle and taking fuel from it.⁶⁰ Located in the jungles of the Satpahari Hills of Hazaribagh, in a terrain that yielded little, and in the remote interiors where prices for grain were exorbitant, Sibū stated that God did not want them to observe restrictions on food, drink and conduct. Tana Bhagats could enjoy *sorho singar batiso ahar* (all kinds of pleasure). Sibū killed a heifer and ate it along with his followers.⁶¹ The policy of vegetarianism was abandoned, as had earlier been the policy of non-violence when Sibū had proclaimed that the hands and legs of all the people except the Oraons would be cut down. In geographically differentiated landscapes, and at different points of time, then, different norms and patterns of behaviour were advocated.

Where boundaries blurred, and the 'seesaw of the sown and the wild'⁶² was continually shifting as it did in Chhotanagpur, and where the colonial administrative

⁵⁹ No 12, Value of the Palamau Revenue Survey Maps, Extract (paragraphs 10-15), from the Director of Land Record and Surveys' Inspection Note, dated 26th July 1915, Selections from Papers for the Revisional Survey and Settlement Report, Palamau, p. 21. .

⁶⁰ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 313 of 1920.

⁶¹ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 54 of 1925.

⁶² Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan, (eds)., *India's Environmental History*, p. 5.

machinery differed in its implementation, the movement of the Tana Bhagats was hardly a singular event with a uniform character, motivated by necessarily similar imperatives. Indeed, the experiences of the Tana Bhagats, as recorded in archival sources, often point to multiple histories of protests and demands that cannot be reduced to a simple story of an agrarian disturbance motivated by a conflict between the adivasis and non-adivasis. At a time when practitioners of tribal history valorised coherence, the tribal historian, through his reconstruction of the movement, gave it a singularity, a structure, a continuity.⁶³

But hierarchies were resisted not merely through allusions to the forests and the fields. Ghosts and spirits⁶⁴ were to be purged; the traditional leadership of the *pahans* (Oraon priest) and *mahtos* (village head) was questioned; sacrifices and non-vegetarianism were renounced; austerity and abstemiousness were to characterize religion and society; the jurisdiction of the *panch* was rejected (administrative body among the Oraons). It was as if a people were retreating from their familiar everyday world: their cattle and lands, their hearth and homes, their rituals and customs. In this rejection, is reiterated, I argue, a critique of a settled agricultural economy and its hierarchies. The offices of the *pahan*, who, helped by the *pujar*, propitiated the spirit world, performed sacrifices and played the central role in *jatras* (ritual celebrations), and that of the *mahto*, who mediated the relationship between the zamindar and the village, were the exclusive preserve of the *bhuinhari khunts* (clans). Even the majority of spirits were regarded as having belonged to the *bhuinhari khunts*, or could be appeased only in the presence of the *pahan*.⁶⁵ Tradition had conferred upon the *mahto* and the *pahan* the joint right to settle vacant *raiya* lands; as the natural leaders of the people, they had emerged as the informants of custom and tradition during survey and

⁶³ In as late as 2011, B.B. Chaudhuri writes: ‘One major conclusion of our study is that the adivasi movements tended to become basically one movement. The archetype was the Santhal movement. Its ideology and organization set the guidelines for the two other (Munda and Oraon) movements.’ See B.B. Chaudhuri, ‘Radical adivasi movements in colonial Eastern India, 1856-1922’, Indian History Congress, 72nd Session, Punjabi University, Patiala, 10-13 December, 2011, p. 72.

⁶⁴ Spirits were ‘organically bound’ to the Oraons in a relationship of reciprocity and mutual interdependence, and were propitiated for the welfare of the entire community. See Ferdinand Hahn, *Einführung in das Gebiet der Kols-Mission* [An introduction to the territory of the Kols-Mission] (Gutersloh: 1907), p. 96.

⁶⁵ Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, pp. 68-71.

settlement operations. The *panch*, which settled Oraon disputes, was constituted by *bhuinhars*; Tanas chose the *mandali* (congregation), and later the *panchayat* (assembly). The irreverence of the Tana Bhagats towards rights and ceremonies that aimed at ensuring safety at important moments of an individual's life, and at each stage of the economic pursuits of the community, thus becomes important. Significantly, the *pahan* and the *mahto* were as much against the movement that had sought to challenge and dismantle their authority. It was reported that 'the mahtos and pahans of the village affected did not join, and disapproved of the attitude of the younger men; they were afterwards found useful in checking the whole movement.'⁶⁶

But there are other events that do not fit into this explanatory mode of academic disciplines or history writing, events that were recorded by officers and missionaries alongside the official narrative of 'unrest' and 'uprisings', 'battles' and 'murders' but which indicated other times, other moments, other imperatives. The Tanas waited for the day when the new moon would arrive: days would then be transformed into long nights, the Tanas asserted. 'The sun would ... set for five days, and there would be only night.' Once this ended, a new light, 'fresh and free from all malevolent elements', would burn.⁶⁷ In anticipation, they took off the tiles from the roofs of their homes waiting for the spirits to come and help them.⁶⁸ Others believed that after practising the Tana faith for three years, perfection would be reached. Norms would then be reversed: Tanas would be the masters of their country and would eat off gold plates. Bullets would melt into water, and swords would twist in the hands of soldiers. Mythical figures seemed to appear in the present. A Sibu of earlier times was reborn as the Tana leader, Sibu Bhagat. A Tana, when confronted by the police as he paraded the streets of Lohardaga, ringing bells and singing songs, announced that he was Dasarath. Others in the procession claimed that they were Ram Chander and Hari.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Among Roy's private papers, earlier located at the office of the Man In India, Ranchi, was a government report, 'Oraon Unrest', which does not however have a reference number.

⁶⁷ F. Zernick, 'Zum Uraon Aufstand von 1915' (About the Uraon Unrest in 1915), *Die Biene auf dem Missionsfelde*, No. 11/12, November/December 1919, p. 97.

⁶⁸ H. Josson, (Bruges: 1921), translated by L. Clarysse, *The Mission of West Bengal or the Archdiocese of Calcutta* (Ranchi: 1993), p. 249.

⁶⁹ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No 54 of 1925.

The 'texture of time' was indeed changing for the Tana Bhagats as they carried out their protests, though from an 'act of protest', the movement had not moved into 'the time of the everyday',⁷⁰ as Banerjee seems to suggest in the context of the Santal rebellion; the two could not be separated.

III

RELEGITIMATED TANA TENETS, RESTRUCTURED CONGRESS IDEALS

It was towards the close of 1920 that Ranchi found a place on the Congress map, and the Tana Bhagats a space in Congress politics. Congress leaders arrived from Calcutta in November 1920;⁷¹ processions, *hartals* (strike) and meetings marked their stay; an organizational network of the Congress was set up.⁷² Contact with the 'aboriginals' was initiated, and the propaganda was swift and intense. Alarmed administrators expressed their fears: These 'simple-minded', 'superstitious' and 'easily influenced' 'aboriginals' could be 'led in the direction of opposition to the government' and aroused 'into a state of savage frenzy'. The Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, indicated his apprehensions:

In my opinion, this tampering with the Uraons and Mundas will inevitably lead to serious developments unless it is checked and checked immediately...the agitators...will not trouble them with the sort of speeches they make elsewhere but will work on their ignorance and superstition...the temperance movement will also be a lever in the agitator's hands for when the aboriginal ceases to drink, he always looks for trouble elsewhere.⁷³

⁷⁰ P. Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, Oxford, 2006, p. 162.

⁷¹ Padain Raj Jain, Bhola Nath Burman, Maulavi Zakaria, Abdul Razak and Sunder Dutt Seobi arrived at Ranchi from Calcutta; local leaders like Gulab Tewari, Nagar Mai, Muhammad Yusuf and Muhammad Ishak joined them. See Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No 50 of 1921.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Lists of meetings and the nature of the speeches delivered were meticulously recorded in official reports.⁷⁴ The links between the Congress and the Tana Bhagats now repeatedly appear in colonial records.

The rapid growth of the movement amongst the aboriginals has fully come up to the expectation, till finally on 12th February we have a meeting of 8,000 persons mostly Oraons, at Kuru the centre of the Tana Bhagat movement and another meeting of about 200 Tana Bhagat leaders, both meetings addressed in violent language by Brahmachari.⁷⁵

Speeches at these meetings were said to contain ‘passages violently anti-European in tone’ that succeeded in ‘arousing considerable excitement amongst their hearers.’ The Congress leader, Brahmachari, spread his message in the local dialect: The Oraons were ‘the original Rajas of the country’ who had now become ‘coolies’. ‘By giving up European things’, they could ‘keep ninety crores of rupees in the country’ and ‘become Rajas again’. The government then would ‘go of its own accord’.⁷⁶ The British state, rather than the landlords, was the projected enemy; non-cooperation with the state and its institutions would enable the Oraons to become Rajas again. As a part of ‘thirty three crores of Indian people’, they could help in preventing the outflow of ‘ninety crores of rupees’ from their land. The boycott of courts and opposition to the government liquor-policy linked the ‘national’ with the ‘local’. The court, as an alien instrument of control in non-tribal hands, was an institution little understood by the Oraons and the Tana Bhagats; the anti-liquor campaign had merged with the Tana practice of the renunciation of alcohol.

If increased numerical participation of the Tana Bhagats in Congress politics was the cherished dream of the Congress, propaganda among the Tana Bhagats had

⁷⁴ In the space of a fortnight, the Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, informed, ‘fifteen meetings were held and three more planned.’ Rajendra Prasad, Swami Bishwanand, Swami Sumeswaranand, Imam Ali and Ram Rachhya Shanna had visited the aboriginals. On 31 January 1921, Gulab Tewari addressed a meeting at Ranchi of about seventy Oraons; on 1 February 1921, Maulvi Osman, Brahmachari and Tewari spoke at a general meeting of Oraons, Mundas, Bhuyans, Ghasis, barbers and Chamars. See *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

achieved its much-desired goal.⁷⁷ This sight of 'aboriginal tribes' from 'backward tracts' crying 'Gandhi Maharaj *ki Jai*' and trudging long distances to attend Congress meetings was reassuring to the nationalists; it was as if their cherished vision of integrating the adivasis into the national movement had been realized. To demonstrate Tana commitment was to underline the Congress achievement. Tanas, it was reported, contributed to the Tilak Swaraj Fund; participated in the National Week of 1923 and the *khaddar* exhibition of 1926; canvassed for subscriptions to the *Lajpal Rai Memorial Fund*; and waved black flags in the demonstration against the Simon Commission.⁷⁸ Applauding them, Gandhi saw the Tanas as dedicated *bhaktas* (devotees):

They are believers in *Khaddar*. Men as well as women ply the *Charkha* regularly. They wear *khaddar* woven by themselves. Many of them had walked miles with *Charkhas* on their shoulders. I saw nearly four hundred on them all plying their *Charkhas* most assiduously at the meeting I had the privilege of addressing. They have their own Bhajans which they sing in chorus.⁷⁹

Along similar lines was Rajendra Prasad's assessment of the relationship between the Tana Bhagats and the Congress; Tana actions, however localised in its expression, were seen to be in consonance with Congress and Gandhian ideals.

They carried the idea of non-violence to the extent of abjuring eating anything red, because blood was red. When they heard that Mahatma had arisen and was asking the people to stick to non-violence they felt that the rearing of goats which would ultimately go to the slaughterhouse was against the creed of non-violence and therefore, drove out their goats from their houses to the jungles and abandoned them not knowing that they would become victims to wild animal and to men who were even wilder...They gave up red chillies, because they looked

⁷⁷ On 21 December 1922, the Searchlight reported: 'About 60 persons of Oraon and Munda sections of the aborigines tribes being in a backward tract near the jungles of Chotanagpur have arrived here [at Gaya] to attend the Congress. It is understood that nearly 400 of their kinsmen will be reaching here tomorrow after walking the whole distance of 200 miles.' See K.K. Datta, *Freedom Movement in Bihar*, Vol. 1 (Patna: 1957), p. 434.

⁷⁸ Government of Bihar, Freedom Movement Papers, File No. 51 of 1921-23.

⁷⁹ MK Gandhi, 'Bihar Notes' in *Young India*, 3 September, 1925 in K.K. Datta (ed.), *Writings and Speeches of Mahatma Gandhi Relating to Bihar, 1917-1947* (Patna: 1960), p. 182.

red. The song which they sang had the refrain that even an ant has life just as a man has and so should not be hurt.⁸⁰

As the Congress sought to amalgamate different bhagats – Tanora bhagats, Haribaba bhagats and the old bhagats who abstained from intoxicating beverages - into the new sect of Swaraj bhagats, referred to by ‘the simple people of the country’ as the ‘*suraj bhagats*’,⁸¹ an exasperated Father Van Houtte of the Roman Catholic Mission wrote:

It cannot be denied that those Bhagats are the most stupid individuals in Chota Nagpur. Christians have tried to converse with them and to make them understand their stupidity, but even in this they are too stupid; they will sit down like a dumb piece of calf flesh and not a line of their features will relax even at your most convincing and personal arguments.⁸²

From active makers of their own destinies, the Tana Bhagats were now seen in official and missionary records to have become passive recipients of Congress ideology. It was the Congress – with their ‘old trick’ of continually shifting from ‘politics’ to ‘religion’⁸³ – that, in the opinion of the missionaries, had enabled this transition. Dilles wrote:

You see, it is so tempting and they are promised so much and all that for a subscription of annas four: no rent, no *chaukidari* tax to be paid anymore; the raj will be there as soon as there is swaraj; they will receive plenty of fields and become the masters of the country. The Christians and all others will have to run away.⁸⁴

If we put aside the mocking voice of the missionary, one can identify a different mode of mobilization and propaganda that was however in use by the local leaders - Gandhi’s ‘pseudo-chelas’⁸⁵ - to get the ‘message’ across – one that made use of

⁸⁰ R. Prasad, *Mahatma Gandhi in Bihar* (Bombay: 1949), p. 131.

⁸¹ Fr Bressers, ‘Conversion of the Lohars, Tongo’, *Our Field*, 12th Year, No. 2, February, 1936, p. 66.

⁸² C. Van Houtte, ‘Report’, *Our Field*, 15th Year, No. 3, April 1939, p. 66.

⁸³ C. Van Houtte, ‘Munda district, Khunti’, *Our Field*, 15th Year, No. 5, June, 1939, p. 180.

⁸⁴ Fr Dilles, ‘Katkahi’, *Chota Nagpur Mission Letter*, 6th Year, No. 9, September 1936, p. 362.

⁸⁵ Fr E Horny, ‘Wireless at Sarwada’, *Our Field*, 7th Year, No. 4, May 1931, p. 77.

sound, dance and visual performance, and drew upon 'Hindu' and Tana modes of worship and cultural traditions. 'Uncouth blokes', wearing the Gandhi cap and claiming to be 'chelas' of Mahatma Gandhi, 'armed with drums and various noise-making instruments' and having 'lungs...fit to belong to bus conductors in Calcutta, were moving from 'one sacred grove to another' gathering large crowds of 'idle folks'.⁸⁶ And then was enacted what Horny describes as an exaggerated drama, a comedy.

As soon as the gathering is sufficiently large and as the "musicians" are tired of belabouring their drums or blowing their trumpets, the leader of our mountebanks stands forth and with a solemn gesture waves crowd and troupe [sic] into silence. He makes a solemn bow to the crowd, and without uttering a syllable he stoops, lies down, and applies his ear to the ground the right ear, for the left wouldn't do. After a while he leaps up and in solemn tone delivers to the awe-struck audience the message which Gandhi Ji is sending through the underground sound waves. And the message is this: "Now at last we have purna swaraj! It is time, brethren, to lead a much simpler life than we have done hitherto [sic]. We must curtail our expenses all round. How shall we do that? By eating no longer any meat, above all no cow's meat and no pork; by giving up smoking, by making no longer any bloody sacrifices to the bongas (spirits). Indeed all the bongas are to be expelled from the land. Away with the Bongas!"

At this moment all the seven disciples of Gandhi Ji break forth into a mad dance, all the while belabouring their drums and blowing their trumpets. They jump about and make the most unlikely contortions as if all the bongas of Chota Nagpore possessed them, until one of them, breaking through the wandering crowd runs away across the fields. And the leader to [sic] cry out: "Behold, there go the bongas. There they go! Let them go. They are gone, gone for ever, gone never to come back again into the land of ours!"

Drops the curtain on the first act of the comedy. After a while, when the audience has had time to recover from its surprise, the leader of the chelas again calls for silence. Let no one utter a breath; he feels that the earth is alive with messages rent out by the great Mahatma, and once again he solemnly prostrates himself and applies his ear to mother earth. He opens and closes his eyes, his countenance expresses wonder, awe, joy, dread, whatever feelings he can counterfeit. Indeed the more grimaces he makes, the greater the certitude that he does indeed hear the very accents of Gandhi Ji's voice. At last the full message has been delivered and received; the chela leaps in the air, cuts a few capers with his followers and then delivers the message:

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

"Brethren, sons of Hindusthan, the bongas have departed. To whom will you offer sacrifice in future? Not to the Bongas since they are gone. Who will henceforth protect you against evil and sickness. [sic] Who will look after your fields and your cattle?... The Hindu deotas will. They are greater then [sic] the bongas were. To them, you must offer milk, ghee, sweets and flowers. Henceforth, delivered from the bongas, you are Hindus."⁸⁷

The 'chelas' had delivered their messages; they now moved on.

The messages conveyed the power of Gandhi: his sermons could not be questioned, his instructions disobeyed. The earth transmitted his words; the choice of 'sacred groves' for the 'performance' sanctified the messages. For a people whose world was inhabited by beneficent and maleficent divine and semi-divine beings, an appeal to their religious consciousness was apt: Gandhi could oust the *bongas*, mediate between the people and their gods, and deliver the ultimate dream of *purna swaraj*. His injunctions were largely in consonance with Tana doctrines and customs: renunciation of sacrifices, the ousting of *bongas*, the protection of cattle, and the practice of vegetarianism. The method of getting rid of the *bongas* reminds one of the spirit-driving practices of the Tanas.⁸⁸ In Gandhi's *swaraj*, with his 'tremendous will-power and might', he would be able to control prices and ensure food for those who followed him: 'this year one maund of rice, by his command, costs 2 rupees, next year he may command it to cost only 8 annas, and later on he might make it come up to 5 and more rupees, just as he likes.' Such pronouncements, as potent carriers of Gandhian messages, were polyvalent texts that allowed varied readings. As local activists spun tales about Gandhi's miraculous and marvellous powers, and passed injunctions in his name, Father Horny of the Roman Catholic Mission noted with indignation: 'Mahatma ji, no doubt, will flatly disown the fatherhood of all those messages that have been broadcasted [sic] here, by his pseudo-chelas.'⁸⁹

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

⁸⁸ See Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, pp. 347-351.

⁸⁹ Fr. E. Horny, 'More Wireless Messages, Sarwada', *Our Field*, 7th Year, No.7, August, 1931, p. 144.

But the Tana Bhagats had already begun to believe in the new Raj that was starting under 'Gandhi Mahatma.'⁹⁰ There were rumours that they had asked Gandhi to visit them and that Gandhi's Raj would come in a year or two.⁹¹ 'Anonymous letters... copied five times and forwarded to as many villages under threat of extinction of all children in the family' were found to be 'daily in circulation'. The letters proclaimed that Gandhi Mahatma's *raj* was established and the Angrez Sarkar (English Government) had been ousted. It was the desire of the Mahatma that every body would abstain from fish and flesh.⁹² In this Raj, there would be a reversal of norms: Christians and Muslims, identified by the Tana Bhagats as enemies, would have to grow the *chundi* and to dance the *Karam*.⁹³ Rice, paddy and cloth would be sold at half the prevailing price, as the Tanas in 1921 had issued orders in Palkot market by beating the drum. While an alarmed Sub-Divisional Officer threatened official action, the Tanas returned to the village to inform the people that since the present Raj was over, the Sub-Divisional Officer would hand over charge to the Tanas within a day or two.⁹⁴

In this Raj, hierarchies within the Oraon world would also be challenged. The *bhuinhars*, economically and socially privileged in the Oraon community, and whom the Tanas had opposed, would be punished for their greed, and for disobeying the injunctions of Gandhi. In a sense, Gandhi seemed to have provided another language to reinforce Tana ideology. Let me refer to the story of Gandhi's encounter with two 'Bhuinhars' in village Lailonga in Raigarh, as recorded by Gallagher of the Roman Catholic Church.

Two Bhuinars were fishing in a river and caught a basketful. A stranger, elderly and kind looking appeared all on [sic] a sudden, and very meekly asked them why they should be taking the life of such harmless creatures. When told of their poverty and how they depended on this trade for their living, he gave them Rs. 5- and asked them to throw back the fish into the river. They expressed gratitude and did as they were told. However after the departure of the stranger, the love of

⁹⁰ Government of Bihar, Freedom Movement Papers, File No. 51 of 1921-23.

⁹¹ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 50 of 1921.

⁹² H. Gallagher, 'Takpara', *Chota Nagpur Mission Letter*, 1st Year, No.12, December, 1930, p. 187

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 51 of 1921.

fish grew again stronger in them and forgetting their promise, they threw their nets again into the river. What was their astonishment, when no sooner had they hauled in their catch, the stranger stood again by their side, but how different looking: angry, powerful and threatening. "Ungrateful and dishonest wretches," he shouted, "I gave you enough to live decently for a fortnight and you still destroy lives. As you must live on fish you shall always eat fish." And there and then the two Bhuinars were changed into *bakuli* (Paddy bird). They are now hopping along the banks of the river living on fish.⁹⁵

The sequential pattern of the narrative is as follows: Gandhi, humane and just, explains his ideas of non-violence and with empathy, resolves problems; he cannot however condone dishonesty and greed; his injunctions, if disobeyed, would result in the wrathful display of his supernatural powers. The bhuinhars, as a result of their misdeeds, were transformed forever.

And, in this Raj, there would be 'rent-free land'. Tana arguments drew upon a much longer past: their ancestors had cleared lands that were jungles; villages were established before the ancestors of present landlords had come to the country; this land therefore rightly belonged to them. The zamindars were 'imposters...the landlords have rights neither to 'khas' cultivation nor to rents or other impositions...the Tanas were determined to die rather than pay a farthing to the landlords whom they regard as usurpers ... they have now decided not to pay more than 2 pailas of dhan to the zamindar.'⁹⁶ In the week ending on 5 March 1921, the Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, reported in despair that the Tana Bhagats had refused 'point blank' to pay rent and chaukidari tax, and to permit a civil court peon to approach land which had been sold for non-payment of rent in village Chigari. Tana Bhagat, the leader, claimed that *Bhagwan*, speaking through him, had said that the land was first theirs: they were not to come to terms with their *maliks* (owners). Accordingly they did not hesitate to forcibly plough the field.⁹⁷ As in the earlier phase of the movement, abandoning the plough, and returning it, were both accommodated within Tana practice.

⁹⁵ H. Gallagher, 'Takpara', *Chota Nagpur Mission Letter*, 1st Year, No.12, December, 1930, p. 187.

⁹⁶ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 50 of 1921.

⁹⁷ This is indicated by the case of 7 February 1921 instituted by Janki Dusadh of Kolhsundi against Tarkan, Jharia, Leton, Etwa, Dimba and Bundhu. *Ibid.*

It is in this context that one can refer to what Archer has termed 'a kind of fantasy-logic, - a set of debating analogies which, repeated from mouth to mouth, make up a kind of living testament' that the Tana movement had developed. He provides the following examples to explain this 'fantasy logic'; the images employed reiterate the Tana concern with land.

...to the question 'Where are your title-deeds?' the answer is 'My spade, my axe and my plough are my title deeds' while, at the same time, ploughing is referred to as writing with a golden pen on the golden land. To the position 'Your lands have been auctioned for arrears of rent and have been purchased by another' the answer is given 'When a man buys a mat, he rolls it up and takes it away. Similarly until the purchaser has rolled up my lands and taken them away, how can he be said to have purchased them?' Or the following terms are offered to landlords – 'Provide our fields with rain and then we will pay rent'. Lastly as a mixture of claim and offer, it is pointed out that the Hindu and Muhammedan landlords originally come to the aboriginals as uninvited guests and have grown rich at their expense. Let them now return the hospitality given to them by the ancestors of the aboriginals, cultivate all the lands themselves and pay half the produce to the aboriginals today.⁹⁸

For those who could not provide title-deeds, agricultural implements were the evidence. The act of ploughing was more important than the 'black and white' of the written word. Lands could never be taken away from those who cultivated it. Once the landlords paid their debts and returned the favours that had been granted to them by the actual owners of the land, a historical process would be completed. Justice would be secured by a simple inversion of the system.

The Mahatma of the Tanas was thus framed in terms of what was important, legitimate and necessary in their perception. He was indeed more than a mere leader in flesh and blood; he featured in their dreams as a messiah who would lead them to a perfect and ordered world. As lores grew around Gandhi, and tales of his miraculous powers spread, Mc.Dowell, Inspector of Police, reported, 'People are asking who Gandhi is that he should be permitted to wage war against the Government.'⁹⁹What

⁹⁸ W.G. Archer, Papers, The Tana Bhagats', APAC, MSS Eur F 236 (not numbered).

⁹⁹ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section File No 50 of 1921.

had unified the multifaceted and the polysemic characterization of Gandhi that had appeared in popular imagination was his omnipresence.¹⁰⁰ Gallagher, of the Roman Catholic Mission, referred to this as he noted: 'He is everywhere and is fully aware of all that goes on throughout India. Very many assert that they constantly feel his presence'.¹⁰¹ The *charkha* associated with him assumed a new meaning. It would help the Tanas to achieve their goal of *swaraj* or rent-free land:

We are plying the spinning wheel which (sic) sounds *son san*. The spinning wheel has become the canon; the spade has become the spear. The spinning needle has become a cup. Kill the army with bullets while they are sleeping. The Ganga will flow in every house and we will play with spears in every village. We will bring about independence. We will take control of the whole world. We will not be afraid of handcuffs or of jail, and we will jump on to the gallows. We will get *swaraj*, our rent-free land.¹⁰²

The *charkha* – a symbol of Gandhian construction work - had become a weapon; its sound appeared to be the rumbles of dissension. The spade – a symbol of their agriculture - had transformed into a spear. *Swaraj* – the symbol of utopia - was rent-free land

Yet, the disciplining of the ryot community was a necessary aspect of Non-cooperation. The ryots were 'to live at peace with the landlords'.¹⁰³ All acts or words tending to excite violence were to be avoided; picketing, social boycott or any other form of pressure outside of moral persuasion were forbidden since civil disobedience was not a part of the programme. As the Sadar S.D.O. reported, 'Two other instruments of Non-cooperation, viz, non-payment of rent and non-payment of revenue may be dismissed in a word, for in this province at any rate, this part of the programme had not been put in operation.'¹⁰⁴ Tana protagonists thus transformed

¹⁰⁰ For an excellent analysis of Gandhian myths, refer to S. Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2' in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. III (Delhi: 1984), pp. 1-61.

¹⁰¹ H. Gallagher, Takpara', *Chota Nagpur Mission Letter*, 1st Year, No. 12, December 1930, p. 187.

¹⁰² S.K. Chandhoke, 'The Tana Bhagats of Chota Nagpur', *Vanyajati*, July 1972, pp. 133-34.

¹⁰³ Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section File No 144 of 1921.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Gandhi's orders and injunctions into statements legitimating their activities, even if these were at variance with the tenets of Gandhism itself. It was the Tana refusal to compromise on issues of land that dominated their actions, and their ideas of the Congress, its leadership and the Raj.

By the 1930s, the political scenario in Ranchi had shifted. In 1939, an anonymous Roman Catholic Father vividly described what was happening there: 'There is nothing like politics to wake up a fellow. Bicycles pass with red or white flags. Motorcars speed along with their colour flying, and even whole bus loads of excited voters keep shouting: 'Gandhi Mahatma ki jai' or 'Adibasi ki jai' as the spirit moves.'¹⁰⁵ Rarely, then, do the Tana Bhagats appear in colonial or missionary records¹⁰⁶ Had the Tanas withdrawn from the scene after the 1930s, disillusioned and distanced from the mainstream of politics only to appear occasionally in moments of mass activity, or had they ceased to bear any importance in reports that dealt with Congress politics?

In 1935, Archer wrote about the Tana Bhagats:

At the present time, the movement is static - no longer novel and no longer actively aggressive. The 'annexation' of villages has practically ceased. Individuals, however, continue to adopt the 'tana' attitude in questions of rent and although rather more throw in the sponge after their holdings have been sold up, many purchasers still walk warily and with tact cede a portion of their purchase.¹⁰⁷

In the phase that Archer refers to as 'static', the Tanas were developing an organizational structure. Their concern with issues of rent remained, but the Tanas now set up *ashrams*, composed *bhajans* afresh, and conducted religious ceremonies. Many gave up land and took to cattle tending, begging and living on the wages of their women. As cattle were believed to be incarnations of God, it was believed that looking after cows would, in time, secure divine intervention. The land problems would then be rectified by a miracle. A kind of skeleton state was developed, Archer

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, 'Mandar', *Our Field*, 6th Year, No. 6, July, 1930.

¹⁰⁶ While the Adibasi Sabha, under Jaipal Singh, advocated the separation of Chhotanagpur from Bihar and emphasized the rights of the 'adibasis' in reserved forests, government recruitment, industrial employment, and in the Cabinet structure, the Congress, aided by the Sanatan Adibasis under Theble Oraon, opposed the separation of Chhotanagpur and talked of national integration. See Public and Judicial Department, January – June 1938, Bihar's Governors' Reports, APAC, No 3136/38.

¹⁰⁷ W.G. Archer, Papers, 'The Tana Bhagats', APAC, MSS Eur F 236 (not numbered).

suggests, as Tanas held offices of priest, manager, clerk, lawyer and constable. Life centred on *gorakshini* (protection of cows), and cow-hospitals were set up.¹⁰⁸ While the protection of cows was advocated in Congress propaganda, the significance that the Tanas attributed to the cow indicated an attachment to a past that preceded their contact with Non-co-operationists. Looking after the cows would secure for them their lost land.

In the absence of direct evidence, it is difficult to speculate on the withdrawal of the Tanas from, or their only temporary participation in, Congress activities. Did the Tanas recede to the background because the movement had chalked for itself a path beyond that of Congress politics? For the Tanas, the Congress was yet another one of those forces that had entered their land. Paths had crossed, moments had been shared, a history was enacted together - and yet the cherished dream of *swaraj* remained undelivered. The Tanas withdrew, and except for stray incidents reported in 1942, government records are silent on their participation. As the Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, wrote to the Deputy Commissioner in 1942: 'There is no doubt from papers seized that a serious attempt was made to excite this Tana element to violent demonstrations but this entirely failed and they could not be prevailed upon to go so far....'¹⁰⁹

But there were others who were never a part of Congress activities. Archer deleted from his account any discussion of the relationship between the two although his account of the 'Tana agitation' extended up to 1935. And as S.C. Roy writes, the Tanas were hardly political. Resolutions of their meeting at Sisai indicated that their interests pertained to 'social, moral and religious affairs'.¹¹⁰ Even the 'sedulous blandishments of certain emissaries of the so-called non-co-operation movement' had failed to draw large sections of the Tanas into the Congress fold.¹¹¹ The few who had

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Government of Bihar, Freedom Movement Papers, No. 54 of 1921.

¹¹⁰ Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, p. 346.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

‘unfortunately’ joined had done so under the ‘delusion that they would thereby be enabled to recover their lost privileges and rights in land.’¹¹²

A history of the Tana Bhagat movement in the phase of Congress politics in the 1920s and 1930s then suggests an alternative reading of the interaction between the Congress and adivasi groups, which has been broadly interpreted in Indian historiography either in terms of the appropriation and incorporation of marginal groups into an anti-imperialist struggle under the aegis of the 'nationalist' leaders, or conversely, in terms of disjunctions and tensions between two groups with irreconcilable interests. These seemingly conflicting processes in adivasi history, I suggest, need to be studied in conjunction. While the Tana Bhagat movement always displayed linkages with its pre-1919 phase, it is equally important to consider the ways in which the tenets initiated between 1914 and 1919 were reaffirmed, reformulated and relegitimated, this time in the name of Gandhi. We need to recognize several processes in operation: Congress 'nationalists' adapted their politics to local conditions, refiguring thereby their slogans in locally cognisable terms; local leaders, more aware of the Tana cultural world, adopted a different mode of propaganda to popularise their messages in Gandhi's name; the Tanas interpreted these often open-ended messages in many ways, but expressing through these their earlier vocabulary of protest.

IV

THEIR VIEW OF THE PAST

¹¹² Roy suggested that the government should ‘... buy up the landlords' rights in their villages with the respective aboriginal village communities on fixed rental...The villages inhabited by the class of extreme Tanas will be at the most fifty and the total cost of buying up the villages will, I believe, not exceed two lacs of rupees at the utmost...the peace and contentment likely to result from such a measure is well worth the expenditure. See Bihar and Orissa Government, Political Department, Special Section, File No. 50 of 1921.

How then are the stories of their movement narrated by the Tana Bhagats, drawing as they do on memories of events passed down generations, but carefully reworking these in conjunction with events relevant today? The past, for the Tana Bhagats, is alive; it is integrally linked to their present. The pasts that they refer to, or the histories that they ‘write’, are narrated by Tana leaders for the community at ritual gatherings, and enshrined in pamphlets and petitions that they submit to state officials. Indeed, a political community needs to locate its present historically, a point made by many in the context of the nation.¹¹³ Through references to the past, Tanas seek to legitimise their demands, claim reparation, and rectify the present.

If one compares the ‘histories’ therefore – one that the official archives provide for us and one that the Tana Bhagats accentuate through different renditions of their history – there are different points of emphases. In Tana history is a beginning, an end, and little in-between: Jatra Bhagat had started the Tana Bhagat movement as a ‘*paradhin senani*’ (unfree warrior), and Gandhi, by involving the Tana Bhagats in the national struggle for independence, had eventually become a ‘*swadhin sena*’ (independent warrior). A pamphlet issued in 2011 by the Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani, Tana Bhagat Sangh Kendriya Committee, Lohardaga, (All India National Freedom Fighters, Tana Bhagat Organisation Central Committee, Lohardagga, Jharkhand) for example, begins with the statement: ‘May Guru Jatra Tana Bhagat remain immortal, May Mahatma Gandhi remain immortal’.¹¹⁴ Or a pamphlet, issued in 2012 by the Tana Bhagat Samiti, which called for an indefinite strike against corruption, described the Tanas as ‘Worshippers of truth and non-violence’.¹¹⁵ Removed from this history is Sibbu Bhagat’s demand in 1919 for a violent mode of agitation, or the fury of Tana Bhagats and Kishans at Jamirapat in Sirguja in 1918

¹¹³ See, for example, T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: 2002), p. 179.

¹¹⁴ Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani, Tana Bhagat Sangh Kendriya Committee, Lohardaga, Jharkhand (All India National Freedom Fighters, Tana Bhagat Organisation Central Committee, Lohardagga, Jharkhand)

¹¹⁵ Brashtachar key birodhmei satya ahimsa havan puja dharna (Against Corruption Truth, Non-violence, Havan, Worship, Strike)

which that had rocked official and missionary circles. Such moments cannot be explained within the projected story of the Tana Bhagats always having followed the path of non-violence. The past is thus carefully crafted; selected historical events are highlighted; Tanas forget certain aspects of their past and embellish others. Operating within the constrained space offered to them by the state to express their demands, they exercise their agency by determining which questions to ask and which to exclude, couching their demands in a way that claims to justice acquire inevitability. By underlining their links with the Congress movement and the loss of their land in the service of the nation, the Tana Bhagats did precisely this. As petitioners from Chhotanagpur, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau, declared in their petition (undated):

Under the British rule, we were earlier slaves. Against the British state, on the orders of Mahatma Gandhi, we hoisted the tricolour flag for swaraj. At that time, the British auctioned the lands of the Tana Bhagats. Now, since the Congress Government is established and the country has achieved freedom, our auctioned lands, fields and homes should be returned to us, and land tax should be pardoned... We Tana Bhagats are Congressmen. Why do the Commissioner and D.C (District Collector) not pay attention to us?¹¹⁶

The rewriting of land rights in Chhotanagpur in favour of the Tana Bhagats and the promulgation of the Ranchi District Tana Bhagat Raiyats Agricultural Lands Restoration Act, 1947, were what the state had owed to the Tana Bhagats for their service to the nation. It was with this belief that a batch of about fifty Tanas, under the leadership of Ram Bhagat and Tana Sardar Bismitra, went to Delhi in 1953 to meet the President, Rajendra Prasad.¹¹⁷ Their *Abhinandan Patra* (Felicitation Letter), submitted on behalf of the Chotanagpur Adivasi Tana Bhagats to the *Deshratna* (jewel of the country), poignantly expressed their anguish at being unheard:

Today it has been seven years since we got independence, but still our pleas have not reached you. We have sent thousands of prayer letters, several times we have requested with our folded hands, but alas! Our stammering voices did not echo in the ears of the gentleman (here

¹¹⁶ 'Gaumata aur Garib Bhai, ham saab dharti mey kaam kartey hai' (Mother Cow and Poor Brother, We all work on this Earth).

¹¹⁷ SK Chanhoke, 'The Tana Bhagats of Chota Nagpur', *Vanyajati*, July 1972, p. 135.

Rajendra Prasad). This is our misfortune ... we have still kept our sorrow within ourselves.¹¹⁸

And yet, justice was their right; the nation, Tanas believed, owed it to them in lieu of their sacrifice; Rajendra Prasad (who had interacted with them earlier) was familiar with their past.

You are aware that in this Chhotanagpur region, we Tana Bhagats, right from 1913, sacrificed everything during the freedom struggle under the inspiration of God and by the order of Bapu (Gandhi). By taking the vow of non-violence, we sacrificed all, our mind, body, property, our place and land. We tolerated everything - jail-sentences, physical torture by the police, injustice. Our land, house and cattle were auctioned, and we were turned into beggars on the street. In this present situation of independent India, the condition of our lives is worse than that of animals.

At present our Government has been formed, which is referred to as the Peoples' Government; in which the person chosen by us formulates laws. Before the vote, Congress volunteers say something but they act differently afterwards, due to which our hopes have been washed away by water.¹¹⁹

This then was a past that referred to concrete historical events. Plotted in this history are important moments that the Tanas recall: Congress sessions at Gaya, Ramgarh and Lahore; Gandhi's campaign in Chhotanagpur; injustice in the hands of the police. In response to Gandhi's call, the Tana Bhagats had walked miles to attend Congress meetings and had given up their lands. Proudly will a Tana Bhagat who had participated in the national movement display his free pass in railways or a badge indicating that he was a '*swatantrata senani*' (freedom fighter). Wearing white *khaddar* (handspun cloth) and occasionally the Gandhi *topi*, he seems ready for a performance. And in despair will a Tana Bhagat, Kartik Tana Bhagat in this case, while implicitly critiquing the state, point to an elderly *swatantrata senani*,: 'Look at

¹¹⁸ *Abhinandan Patra* (Felicitation Letter) submitted by the Chotanagpur Adivasi Tana Bhagats, Lohardagga, Date-11.11.53.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

him, *Didi*. Is this what he deserves after fighting for the independence of the *desh* (country)?¹²⁰

Erased too from their statements is any positive assessment of the actions taken by the government, or references to statistics summarised in government records on the effectiveness of the Ranchi District Tana Bhagats Agricultural Land Restoration Act, 1947. The Act, enacted by the Bihar State Government, intended to restore ‘all those agricultural lands of theirs (Tana Bhagats) back to them which had been sold for arrears of rent for the pursuance of any movement launched or believed to have been launched by the Indian National Congress in any of the years 1921-1942’.¹²¹ In 1952, it was revised. The amended Act referred to ‘raiyaats or under-raiyaats’ who have been evicted from their land in default of payment of rent in lieu of their participation in ‘any freedom movement between 1913 and 1942’.¹²² A special officer was appointed by the government to look into the welfare of the Tana Bhagats; residential schools were set up; the State Congress granted pensions and grants to Tanas who had participated in the ‘freedom struggle’. *Tana Bhagats, A Tribute*, published in 1972 by the Directorate of Public Relations, Bihar for the Revenue and Land Reforms Department, and significantly on 2nd October, enumerated some of these measures:

Up till now 3290.54 acres of land have been restored and a sum of over 8.88 lakhs have been paid as compensation to the outgoing occupants. The validity of the legislation has been extended from time to time to enable the Tana Bhagats to apply for restoration, and the Act has also since been amended to enable the local Deputy Commissioner to revive all those cases which had earlier been rejected merely for technical reasons such as want of adequate documentary or other evidence...At the same time, vigorous efforts have been made by Government to trace out and locate old case records of auction sale for restoration as the Tana Bhagats are often handicapped in doing so for

¹²⁰ It is in this context that D. Chakravarty’s idea of ‘historical wounds’ becomes relevant, ‘a particular mix of history and memory’ that is ‘distinct from historical truths’, privileging an ‘experiential access to the past’. See D. Chakrabarty, ‘History and the Politics of Recognition’ in K. Jenkins, S. Morgan and A. Munslow (eds), *Manifestos for History* (London and New York: 2007), pp. 21-34.

¹²¹ See clauses of the Ranchi District Tana Bhagats Agricultural Land Restoration Act, 1947 (Bihar Act II of 1948).

¹²² See clauses of the Ranchi District Tana Bhagats Agricultural Land Restoration Act, 1947 (Bihar Act II of 1948) (As modified up to the 1st May, 1960).

want of relevant documents. Up till now 2,105 case records have been located and local inquiries have been completed in regard to 1,029 such records with a view to eventual restoration. ... For providing legal assistance an initial grant of Rs 6,000 has been placed at the disposal of Deputy Commissioner, Ranchi, to have a panel of Assistant Government Pleaders to prosecute the cases before the Special Officers empowered under the Act.¹²³

In Tana perception however, this Act could not address their grievances. Indeed, within the act were included certain provisions that had ensured its failure. Under the Act, the following details were sought: the name of the village in which the holding was situated; the *thana* (police-station) number, the name of the *mahal* (plot), the *tauzi* (revenue register) and *Khata* (register) number of the plots; the original rental together with local cess, if any; the approximate date, month and year of sale.¹²⁴ Beleaguered by the protocols of a legal system, many of the Tanas could not provide any 'evidence' or legal document to support their claims for compensation. And for those who could, *banjar* (barren) lands were supposedly given as compensation. Others could not displace the later occupants of the land. Tana Bhagat petitioners from Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Palamau, questioned the validity of the legal means of authentication: 'Wearing Gandhi *topi*, we Tana Bhagats gave full support in making mother India free, we Tana Bhagats do not want to fight case. We have given convenience to others, now we should be given convenience.'¹²⁵

The importance of legality, a part of colonial and post-colonial sensibilities, however had been internalised by many. If earlier Tana quests for justice had failed in the courts, one needed to appeal yet again to the High Court, this time with the required documentation. In the perception of some of the Tana leaders, once the British recorded rights on land, and oral claims assumed a written form, the *bhuinhars* were able to take advantage of British legislative intervention and record lands in their

¹²³ *Tana Bhagats A Tribute*, Ranchi 2nd October 1972, published by the Directorate of Public Relations, Bihar, for the Revenue and Land Reforms Department, printed at the Secretariat Press, Patna, pp. 4-5.

¹²⁴ Ranchi District Tana Bhagats Agricultural Land Restoration Act, 1947 (Bihar Act II of 1948), Schedule Form I.

¹²⁵ 'Gaumata aur Garib Bhai, ham saab dharti mey kaam kartey hai' (Mother Cow and Poor Brother, We all work on this Earth)

names at the cost of the other less powerful ryots, a group to which the Tana Bhagats belonged. It is however not merely the moment of writing, the conversion of the oral into the written, that was challenged; the written record, the document itself, now assumed importance. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, as Tanas pointed out, had recorded rights and privileges incorrectly, and yet continued to form the basis of decisions regarding rent and revenue in Jharkhand; ownership of land had been incorrectly registered in the *khatians* (title register) during the survey and settlement operations. The Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani now demanded the ‘*Jamabandi*’ (village register containing the names of tenants, their holdings, the amount of rent they pay). Organizing themselves along the lines of a legal body with a Central Chairman, Deputy Chairman, General Secretary, Joint Secretary, Treasurer, Organiser, Lohardagga District Chairman, Gumla District Chairman, Ranchi District Chairman, Latehar District Chairman, and member Tana Bhagats, they expressed their demands in the language of legality: ‘We Tana Bhagats demand enactment of Land reforms of 1908 and 1947 CNTA ...’.¹²⁶ Significantly, the indefinite hunger-strike called by the Tanas in 2012 against corruption was to be held in the grounds of the Kutcherry (court).¹²⁷ And as Kartik Tana Bhagat, belonging to the same organization, told me: ‘We have no option but to file our papers in the High Court. The point is to find these papers.’ ‘Didi’, he continued, ‘we need the *dalil* (documents) to recover our lands.’ And yet, the poignant impossibility of entirely transiting to modern legal sensibilities is as much captured in his plea that followed: ‘The documents, I am told, are in a publishing house in Kolkata. Can you help us in procuring these documents from Kolkata?’

My intention however is not to argue that the past for the Tanas was always wilfully constructed, or selectively appropriated. Indeed, the past itself was changing as their movement progressed across diverse locales and different temporal scales. Scattered across Chhotanagpur, the Tanas had different experiential accesses to the past; the

¹²⁶ Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani, Tana Bhagat Sangh Kendriya Committee, Lohardaga, Jharkhand (All India National Freedom Fighters, Tana Bhagat Organisation Central Committee, Lohardagga, Jharkhand)

¹²⁷ Brashtachar key birodhmei satya ahimsa havan puja dharna (Against Corruption Truth, Non-violence, Havan, Worship, Strike)

articulation of their memories and their depictions of the past thus would differ, or converge. Figures once important receded from Tana memories, new ones emerged as significant. And some figures like Jatra Bhagat and Gandhi remained in Tana memory, though the way they were recalled could/would change in different narrations of Tana history. But around the memories of historical figures and events grew yet other stories, wondrous and momentous, which we, as historians, relegate to the realm of myths and lore, but which, for the Tana Bhagats, are 'real'. The river Koel flowed with the blood of the martyrs when the British fired upon the Tana Bhagats during their no-rent campaign. When Tana *rishis* (sage) performed their sacrifices, from the fire arose the hazy contours of the *triranga* (tricolour flag). The Congress later adopted the *triranga* as their *jhanda* (flag). Gandhi, in the course of his Gyani Tana Bhagat travels across Bihar, got off the train and kept it waiting so that he could go and meet the Tana Bhagats. Since the Tana Bhagats could not provide Nehru with documents about their loss of land during the Congress campaign, they sent him a clod of earth from which had sprung a peepal sapling. This was evidence of their sacrifice. Some of the Tana Bhagats who had left with their families, goats and sheep for Lahore in order to attend the Congress session were lost on the way and never came back to their ancestral homes. To draw upon the argument of Cohen, the 'reconstructive work of the historian is...in constant tension with two other ways of knowing the past – experience and myth – that, in terms of bearing on ordinary human lives, are far more pervasive and influential.'¹²⁸

Yet, all Tana Bhagats had not joined the Congress. And all Tana Bhagats had not lost their land due to their participation in the 'freedom movement'. How then would this section articulate their grievances, and quantify their expectations from the state? Tana responses lie outside the language of legality; their past, for which they claim their rights from the state, refer to times that cannot be chronologically situated. It is a past that begins at Rohtasgarh where the Oraons had been ousted by the *mlechhas* (ritually impure), of movements and migrations, and ultimately their settlement at

¹²⁸ P. A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth* (New York: 1997), p.xi.

Chhotanagpur where they cut the jungles and converted the forests into fields.¹²⁹ Based on Oraon myths of origin and the words of their ancestors, which were later reproduced in Settlement Reports, anthropological texts and missionary writings, the Tana perception of the past seems to converge with that of other communities in Chhotanagpur, and especially that of the Oraons. Particularly from the 1980s, there has been an increased demand of the adivasi community in Jharkhand for *jal*, *jangal* and *jamin*.¹³⁰ ‘But I have not understood’, I repeated to a senior Tana Bhagat leader, ‘How much land, in acres, do you expect from the sarkar?’ My attempt at trying to concretise in figures the anguish of a people experiencing an everyday vulnerability and powerlessness was answered through the mocking tone with which he responded to my question: ‘We have cleared the jungles of Chhotanagpur and cultivated the lands. Why should we give the *sarkar* anything?’ ‘We have lost our land, our forests, our water, and you are asking me to quantify this? Our demand is that all the land in Chhotanagpur is returned to us’. Tana Bhagat petitioners from Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Palamau articulated their history and demands as follows:

In this moon-sun, in this earth we were born and got incarnation. On that day, the jungle was desolate. In those days, we used to live in the shade of trees. We used to live by eating *Geti-tebna*, flower-fruits, roots, herbs-leaves, *kannod*, *piyar* (forest produce) etc. Then God revealed a remedy. With our strength, and along with Lakshmi, we levelled the depressions after clearing forests and preparing the earth, and removed tigers-snakes with bravery. And we started working as peasants in rain, winter, and summer. Under the rain and the wind, we started ploughing with *Guggu Chopi Kodi*, *Kudal*, *Jhilgi Jhoda Har Chowk*, *Patta*, *Kudri* (agricultural implements). On the day we prepared the earth after clearing the forests, neither lord nor his order, neither court nor *kutcherry* (civil court), neither *sipahi*, *daroga* or *chaukidar* (local law officers), came in our way and stopped us. Nobody said anything to us. We prepared the earth in total freedom....¹³¹

¹²⁹ Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, pp. 24-26.

¹³⁰ B.D. Sharma, *Tribal Affairs in India: The Crucial Transition* (New Delhi: 2001), p. 4.

¹³¹ ‘Gaumata aur Garib Bhai, ham saab dharti mey kaam kartey hai’ (Mother Cow and Poor Brother, We all work on this Earth)

Another pamphlet expressed similar sentiments: ‘God created the Earth, We are children of God, Pray, Wherefrom (sic) has the government appeared?’¹³² Here then was a reference to yet another kind of past, one that was essentially rhetorical, shorn of precise reference, one that was therefore powerful, evocative, and crucial for a marginalized people, trying to stake a claim.

In the *swaraj* that they envisaged, their demands would be met. This was a reordered world in which many Tana aspirations from colonial times would be resolved, but it would also seek to engage with a new framework of democratic citizenship, however complex and differentiated.¹³³ In this envisaged utopia, drinking and cow-slaughter were forbidden. Taxes relating to land would not be imposed. Bribery and injustice in the Forest, Land Revenue and Excise Departments would be punished. Tanas with insufficient lands would be given additional ones. Seats should be reserved for Tana Bhagats in every department; their children would receive free education. An office for Tana Bhagats would be established in every sub-division, and an employee from each Tana family would be employed in the service of religion.¹³⁴ The Tanas would administer themselves through their village *panchayats*, and therefore required no state-government. In order to fulfil their dreams, in January 1960, a group of Tanas asked the Special Officer for two hundred guns and swords and fifteen cannons for protecting the land of Chhotanagpur.¹³⁵ Their path of protest was one that could thus, if required, veer away from the path of non-violence. Tana Bhagat representatives of Latehar, Palamau, expressed similar sentiments in their meeting on 1 October, 2012, in which I was present. If the government would not accede to Tana demands, the time had now come for them to abandon the peaceful methods of Jatra and Gandhi, and adopt the path of violence that Sibuhagat had advocated. ‘We come from the area of Sibuhagat’, a Tana leader from Latehar proclaimed at the meeting. ‘We will follow

¹³² Sharma, *Tribal Affairs in India*, pre-contents page.

¹³³ P. Chatterjee, ‘After Subaltern Studies’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVII, No. 35, September 2012, p. 46.

¹³⁴ For a list of the demands of the Tana Bhagats, see ‘Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani, Tana Bhagat Sangh Kendriya Committee, Lohardaga, Jharkhand’, ‘Brashtachar key birodhmei satya ahimsa havan puja dharna’ and the ‘*Abhinandan Patra*’ submitted by the Chotanagpur Adivasi Tana Bhagats, Lohardaga, Date-11.11.53.

¹³⁵ Chanhoke, ‘The Tana Bhagats of Chota Nagpur’, p. 139.

a different path'. Others from Ranchi and Lohardagga, who were members of the Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Swatantrata Senani (All India National Freedom Fighters), however hushed him up.

The Tana depiction of history, I would like to point out, also drew upon non-advansi initiatives and interventions. Indeed, the insertion of Jatra Bhagat as one of the icons of Jharkhand's history was perhaps not a Tana contribution. As Ashok Bhagat, Secretary of the Vikas Bharati, claims: 'The different advansi communities had their leaders, but the Oraons did not. I was the one to give prominence to Jatra Bhagat as an Oraon leader of Jharkhand at a time when there were few who remembered him'. The members of his ashram at Bishunpur provided the broad outlines of the story whereby social memories of the Tana Bhagat movement were resurrected by a non-Tana Bhagat, who signified the movement by building a statue of Jatra. The story, which could be as much a myth-making of their leader by his followers, was as follows. When Ashok Bhagat embarked upon his development programme in Bishunpur, the anthropologist and then Vice-Chancellor of Ranchi University, LP Vidyarthi, advised him to resurrect the legacy of Jatra Bhagat in the place where he was born. Bishunpur was then a remote area with little connectivity. Upon touring the area on foot and asking around, Ashok Bhagat chanced to meet someone who knew about Jatra's origins. Jatra's son was then alive. To memorialise the movement, he commissioned in the late 1980s, the building of Jatra Bhagat's statue in Bishunpur. The search in the archive yielded little information on Jatra, and of course no photograph. The statue was thus modelled on his grandson, Deshwa Tana Bhagat, the 'living' link to an iconic figure! Under this statue, the Tana Bhagats congregate for Jatra's worship in October every year, and go on to celebrate the birth of Gandhi on the following day. It is a symbolic act that entangles the history of the Tana Bhagats with the history of the Congress and of the nation: the date of birth of Gandhi determined when the Tana Bhagats would pay obeisance to the founder of their faith. Today, this statue stands for Jatra Bhagat in pictorial depictions of the icons of Jharkhand's struggles towards statehood.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

The Tana Bhagats are dwindling in number and strength; but their leader, Jatra Bhagat, has emerged as one of the icons of adivasi protest in Jharkhand today. For the relatively young state of Jharkhand that needed its heroes, and for the Oraons who unlike the Mundas and Santhals did not have icons like Birsa Munda or Sidhoo and Kanhu, the resurrection of Jatra had a significance. As the years rolled by, Jatra, as a historical figure, was relegated to the colonial archive. But Jatra, as a part historical and part mythical figure, emerged as the son of God who had descended on earth to save his people, a Baba to be worshipped, the saviour of the Oraons who continued even today his communication with his followers through the '*akashvani*' (divine statement). Gandhi, in contrast, remained a historical figure, linked to the Congress and the nation, who was however elevated to the status of a Baba due to his greatness. In Tana perception, both Jatra and Gandhi expressed God's spirit in human flesh; their making reflected the ways through which the Tana Bhagats related to the divine world and to their human world. If Dharmesh had reached down to the Tanas by sending his representative in the person of Jatra who was more divine than human, Gandhi was a human being who had reached up to the Gods due to his heroic deeds.

How then are historical antecedents of adivasi resistance creatively worked out in post-colonial India? There are several pasts, not always mutually exclusive, that are in operation: at times historically framed, at times carefully crafted, at times consciously evocative; at times unconsciously structured. As Tana Bhagats negotiate with a Tana past/ identity, an adivasi past/ identity and a nation's past/ identity, they express divergent voices and disparate dreams. Their pamphlets begin with invocations to multiple images that cannot be quite reconciled, pointing to the fact that several pasts, several histories, several identities come into play in the making of the Tana Bhagats: Victory to Tana Religion! Victory to Mother Earth! Victory to Mother cow! Victory to Tana Bhagat Peasants! Victory to Mother India! Victory to Mahatma Gandhi, Victory to National flag! In their self-depiction, the Tana Bhagats claim their identities at different levels. At times, they are a part of the nation's history as they talk about their participation in the national movement. They are, again,

adivasis who share a sense of belonging and a common vocabulary of protest. ‘The Mundas, Oraons and Kharias were...’ is the way they often begin with their stories. And yet, they are not always so. They proclaim themselves to be Oraons, and often, more narrowly, Oraons who are against the *bhuinhars*, *pahans* and *mundas*, controllers of the ritual and economic worlds of the Oraons. As Anderson writes, the idea of the nation required people not only to expand their sense of community in new ways but in equally novel ways to constrict it.¹³⁶ For the Tana Bhagats, who today claim a political identity, this expansion and constriction of their community is a continual process. This paper on the Tana Bhagats thus, and here I quote selectively from Portelli, ‘tries to convey the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness...floating as it does in time between the present and an ever-changing past... and melting and coalescing in the no-man’s land between orality to writing to back’¹³⁷

¹³⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd Edition (London: 1991), in Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, p. 180.

¹³⁷ A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: 1991), p. vii.