

## **KRISHNA RAJ SUMMER TRAVEL FELLOWSHIP 2016**

### **'Modes of Negotiation in Santhali Communities'**

#### **PROJECT MEMBERS**

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Our research project's primary focus was centered around the lives and struggles of the Santhali people living in the Mohammad Bazaar and Rampurhat townships, near the town of Mallarpur in the north-west Birbhum District of West Bengal (see Figure 1). While the communities based in these townships have traditionally been hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators during the colonial period, with the advent of modernization in postcolonial India, and a greater interest in the natural resources of the Birbhum district of West Bengal (which lies between the Chotanagpur plateau and the plains of Bengal), have displaced the traditional Santhali community living in this region. The findings of a survey undertaken by the Loknadi Resource Centre in 2009<sup>1</sup> across 132 Santhal villages found that nearly 3,500 acres of agricultural land vested to landless tribals had been illegally distributed among quarry owners. The building of dams, mines and quarries by large stone-quarrying and stone-crushing industries, in direct defiance of tribal land rights and environmental concerns, have destroyed the traditional livelihood in over 65 villages in 3 blocks of Birbhum, with ground water levels also having dropped by 5 feet on an average. Similarly, Felix Padel and Samarendra Das have argued that bauxite mining in regions of East India have resulted in some of the worst destruction of natural habitat and people's lifestyles, sparking various movements against the invasion of capitalist mining industries into tribal lands<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Uddalak Mukherjee, 'By The People But Not Always For The People', *The Telegraph*, 31 July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Padel, Felix and Samarendra Das. 2010. *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*. New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan.



FIGURE 1

Most people living in these regions have had to become wage-labourers working for these stone industries, which often openly flout labour laws. Due to the lack of adequate equipment or protection, many within the Santhali community suffer from respiratory disorders, such as silicosis, asbestosis, and pneumoconiosis (nearly 58 percent of men and women workers employed in the quarries over the last 20 years<sup>3</sup>). Further, many women and young girls who work as wage-labourers face repeated sexual harassment and gender discrimination. The exposure and influence of outside industrial culture has also caused a marked increase in alcoholism, and problems of malnutrition and high mortality rates (the average infant mortality rate has risen by 12 per cent, while the death rate among adults has increased by 38 per cent<sup>4</sup>) continue to be present. With the help of local support groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Santhali people have started to organize themselves, and have begun to assert their identity and fight for their rights as a community protected by constitutional law. There have been attempts to reclaim the rights over land, as well as arguing for a more sustainable use of local natural resources.

### **FIELDSITE ONE: Atla village, Birbhum district, West Bengal**

The village is located 2-3 km from Tarapith, the nearest major town. We observed a clear segregation between the adivasi and non-advasi parts of the village. The Santhali concentration was divided into two parts on the either side of the pond: *pashchim para* (“western neighbourhood”) and *purbo para* (“eastern neighbourhood”). The two adivasi lanes come first, and one has to walk another 2-3 minutes to encounter the other houses. All the houses in the adivasi lane are *kuccha* (“mud houses”) and the livestock (sheep, cows, goats, hens and ducks) roam freely in that area. Within the lanes too, there is a division between the Christians (converted) and Non-Christians, with one lane (the *pashchim para* or western locality) dominated by the former.

Each lane, instead of consisting of individual huts, contains sections in which multiple families reside – each family has its own hut, but shares a *gola* (“granary”), an outer yard, and at times vegetable patches. In general, the

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<sup>3</sup> Uddalak Mukherjee, ‘By The People But Not Always For The People’, *The Telegraph*, 31 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

segregation is based on familial relation – siblings or cousins and their families lived in one section. All families are involved in some sort of agricultural work, with women also weaving baskets and mats from *khejur* (a local grass) leaves. We observed that the older women tended to have prominent tattoos, while the younger generation seemed to go for relatively inconspicuous ones. People of working age generally work in the field the entire day, and come back only in the evening around 4-4:30 pm, with men and women usually gathering socially in different locations – women (of all ages) underneath a large tree or along the side of the road; the older men in a large open space in the purbo para or eastern locality, while the younger boys would go off to play football in the evening. The daily wage, as told to us by a Hindu informant, varies between 160-200 rupees per day.

On the other hand, the other part of the village (the so-called “Bangali para”, consisting primarily of Hindus) has many more cement houses, but there is not too much segregation between those and mud houses – two of the largest cement houses were right next to mud houses. The houses themselves aren’t in compounds, as in the Adivasi lanes, but stand-alone structures that can have multiple stories as the family expands. This part had a proper cow shelter, and there were fewer goats roaming around. There were two temples in this side of the village: a smaller shrine by the side of the road, and a large structure dedicated to Bama Khyapa, the local diety. There were also two *chai* (“tea”) stalls, and a small general store in between these two parts of the village, but not too many adivasis would gather there during the mornings or evenings – people would gather in the evening at these stalls, near the temples’ entrances, or sitting near the two ponds and one of the fields near the main road. The ponds were owned by several people, and so the catch is distributed amongst them (regardless of who actually fishes). There is some interaction between the two parts of the village – one of our informants (a Hindu) was clearly on very familiar terms with all the people in the Adivasi lanes, stopping to talk to people in the lanes and asking them whether we could speak to them (as opposed to asserting/informing, which another informant tended to do).

The encroachment in Atla (unlike in our other sites) came not from the mining industries, but from the commercial and tourist activities of the nearby Tarapith

town, a major religious tourist spot – one of our major informants (a Santhali Christian man who was the local postmaster and an ad hoc head for the youth in the village) told us about the troubles they'd been having under the current government regime in keeping hold of the little land that they had. Atla itself was also a tourist spot, with the *Bama Khyapa* temple attracting large contingents of Bengali devotees in hired cars who tended to disrupt traffic, litter, and scandalize the local livestock.

The economic gap between the caste Hindu and Adivasi parts of the village manifested itself in the following patterns:

- A. **Land Ownership:** All the fields in the surrounding areas belonged to the Hindus. In the winter season, they worked on the fields themselves. In the summer, they leased the fields out to the adivasis, who had to pay a share of the produce as rent. Hence, while the Hindus have some steady source of income all year round, the adivasis have a limited period in which to earn.
- B. **Housing Structures:** During the time-period of our fieldwork, the adivasi part of the village didn't as of yet contain any cement houses (which are more expensive but durable). Under the "Indira Awas Yojana" (now known as the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana, a government scheme that provides monetary aid to the rural poor for housing), at least four households have begun the process of building permanent structures. The distribution of benefits brings to light local hierarchical structures within the adivasis in that village – the first awardees of the scheme in the non-converted sections were the families of the village tribe head.
- C. **Work:** In the adivasi section of the village, the majority of men and women were engaged in agricultural work. However, this work is limited to the season in which the fields are leased to them, and the remainder of the year depends on that yield. Moreover, they have no control over the methods of agriculture employed – types of crop, fertiliser and pesticide used are all decided by the owner.

One of the starkest effects of this was the decline in varieties of agricultural crop. An Adivasi woman, who had been living in Atla for over four decades, lamented the standardisation of rice varieties grown over the years. Earlier,

there were at least twelve varieties of rice that people used to grow, many of which were varieties of brown rice (which didn't provide much yield per acre of land). The variety of white rice currently used yields almost double the amount, and since it is also a cash crop, the landowners are more interested in it rather than the brown rice varieties.

She also attributed the spread of diseases to the fertilisers and pesticides used for farming, which she says their bodies were unable to process.

Santhali medicinal cures, relying on an in-depth knowledge of local leaves and roots of plants (that are themselves also dying out), are not of much use in the face of these diseases, which meant a greater reliance on non-adviasi medicinal practices.

Within Atla village, we observed four contrasts that seemed the most interesting with regards to a comparative approach to understanding Santhali identity and modes of resistance:

- A. **Education and Medicine:** In the case of education, there was an active effort by the adivasis to embrace certain non-adviasi educational avenues offered by the various schools and institutions. The place in which we lodged for the duration of our fieldwork was run by a UK-based NGO that, amongst other things, also functioned as a primary school. Most children of 4-5 years (if not all) from the nearby Santhali population usually went there, in order to study English and Bangla. The teachers informed us that previous generations of Santhalis were not aware of "formal education", and can only speak Santhali fluently. The elder generation residing in our field site learnt Bangla through their interactions with caste Hindu Bengali people for business, but Santhali remained their primary language of interaction. It was believed by some of the local teachers working at the school that adivasis as a community were a hundred years behind the caste Hindu Bengalis, and thus they felt the need to put in extra effort to make sure that their children were capable of surviving in the modern world. One of our informants, a young woman who had been educated in the NGO school and later in a government school, said "it is for our own good" when asked about the educational initiatives taken by non-Santhalis. Further, when we enquired

about any kind of clash between Santhali rituals, norms, cultural practices on the one hand, and formal education on the other, the younger generation seemed to perceive no such tension. All young men and women were enrolled in the nearby government school, and said that they attended regularly. Agricultural activities seemed to have taken a backseat to education in the case of the younger generation. Even recreational activities were strictly for before or after school hours. However, their discontent was with their financial prospects, post attaining their secondary school degree. Most of them aspired towards non-agricultural jobs, which paid better and involved less manual labour, but such jobs – for example, that of drivers, construction workers, or clerks - were severely limited. Professional limitation seemed to be a cause of building tension, particularly in young men who had gotten married and were forced to work in the fields to provide for their families. Physical activity (football) became a mode of both dealing with (and at times accentuating) this discontent, is discussed below.

In the case of medicine, there was a deep mistrust of non-Adivasi forms of treatment, and we observed efforts to cure diseases and illnesses by using traditional Santhali medicinal knowledge and cures, going to a doctor being a final resort if all else failed. One of our informants, whose young son had apparently contracted jaundice, said to us, “Jaundice is a very tricky disease. One mis-step, and my son could die. These doctors aren’t the smartest. They can easily misdiagnose and give wrong medicines. We can’t afford to rely on them. I am treating him with reliable methods.” The NGO also doubled as a hospital, with doctors who visited four days a week to treat patients for free. One isn’t entirely sure of whether this lack of faith in doctors was due to the perception of the (in)competence of local doctors, or a general disbelief in allopathic medicine. Nonetheless, the place of non-*adivasi* medicine and healing (which was seen as a negative aspect of non-*adivasi* society) was thus the same place that was associated with non-*Adivasi* learning and education (a positive development in their eyes).

The relative acceptance of non-*adivasi* treatments by certain Santhali families could be related to some extent the Christian and Non-Christian Santhali divide, which is discussed in detail below.

**B. Christian vs. Non-Christians:** There has historically been a high amount of missionary activity and aid-efforts in Santhali communities, particularly in Jharkand. The impact of these activities was clear here too, with a number of people who had converted to Christianity – Out of 59 households, 18 had converted to Christianity. Our very first interaction with a group of women (who were sitting together under a tree for some light work and conversation) gave us a hint of the way identities had been challenged and destabilized with these conversions. One woman, who had said ‘yes’ on being asked if she was Santhali, also said that she was a Christian. When we asked the entire group whether Christians were still Santhalis, one of the younger women immediately said no. Then an older woman interrupted, saying that “They are still the same *jaat* (caste group or community), but their titles (surnames) have changed now”. However, there was clearly still some confusion in the minds of the women, regarding how exactly the Christian Santhalis could be of the same *jaat*. The non-Christian Santhalis maintained that relations between the two sides were cordial. Many of them were uncertain as to why exactly people chose to convert, but didn’t explicitly hold it against them. The majority belief seemed to be that they had converted due to monetary incentives.

However, one of our Christian informants told a very different story. Firstly, she said that most conversions happened due to the rigidity of the adivasi system of religious rituals and medicinal practices. Whereas traditional Santhali culture dictated that their religious practices were prescribed by the *Majhi* (village head) of the village, Christians were free to worship at home, attending Church as and when needed. Further, there was a belief amongst the Christian Santhalis that there were somehow fewer diseases in Christian settlements, due to the use of non-traditional medicines whenever needed. People converted in order to be able to cure diseases in the way they saw fit. However, for them, this conversion didn’t mean a rejection of their Santhali identity – indeed, they claimed that they were still Santhali, but that other Santhalis sometimes refused to see it that way. There was a contestation, in this case, between the idea of identity as bloodline, and identity as created and reinforced through daily ritual practices.



C. **Physical Activity:** Football seemed to occupy a central position in the social life of young Santhali men living in Atla. The village had its own football team (Atla Adivasis), with the postmaster (himself a former state-level player) acting as the coach. They also had a dedicated “sports club”, a room made of mud in the center of one of the fields, covered with the names of famous football players and drawings of possible team logos. What it lacked however, was a dedicated football ground – the men had to practice and play in a common ground near Tarapith, one shared by the Bengalis living in that town as well. Yet the men were diligent players, practicing every single day in the evening following their daily labours until the sun went down. Indeed, during our initial interactions with the Santhalis we were often confused as to why there seemed to be only women, old people and children around no matter what time of the day we visited. We later found out that the only time to really interact with the young men was early in the morning, before they went off to work in the fields. We requested the postmaster to arrange a meeting with some of the youths who were part of the sports club one morning – a sizable crowd of young men arrived, ranging in age from 5 or 6 years of age, to those married with children of their own.

In our conversations with the young men of the village, they often talked about the important role that football played in building notions of self-reliance and team work. Said one of the men, “Football is our game, the Bengalis [meaning caste-Hindus] play cricket. That’s because we know how to work together, and they only know how to compete with one another!” While both games were definitely team-games, cricket was seen as much more individualistic and didn’t require much work, whereas football was seen to embody the positive values of hard-work, diligence, determination and team-play. There were also interesting notions of masculinity at play, as they mocked the caste-Hindu men of their inability to play by deriding them as “weak” and “unfit”. After all, they argued, football involved running, tackling, dribbling, and scoring goals against the opponent, while cricket involved a lot of standing around and the occasional batting and bowling. Football became a site of challenging notions of caste hierarchy, a fact that the caste-Hindus were themselves apparently aware of, as the men claimed that they had been prevented from using any of the fields to practice by the Hindus. The only ground they had, had been purchased by the UK-based

NGO in order to build their ashram-centre, and they have petitioned the owner and founder of the NGO for a new football ground. They claimed this need on the grounds that their team was a professional one that had won many awards – we were shown some pictures of their trophies by the postmaster, who told us, “We have beaten many teams across the district [during tournaments]. We want to be able to play at the state-levels, but we can’t if we don’t have our own grounds to practice on.” These tournaments often had cash prizes, money that was reinvested back into the club in order to pay for their jerseys, their shoes, and the entry fees for these tournaments. Many of the men told us that they preferred football to agricultural work, and desperately wanted to play professionally in order to avoid having to labour in the fields for their livelihood. Through the course of these tournaments, they often interacted with adivasis from various other districts in Bengal, as well as some adivasis from Jharkhand (a state the postmaster himself hailed from). They mentioned how football became an important mode of recognizing each other as adivasis, and the sense of community that came about from a healthy sense of competition that was tempered with team-work.

**D. Formal Structure (Dishom Majhi) vs. Ground Reality:** Put simply, there was a significant difference in some of the customs as described to us by the *Dishom Majhi* (the Supreme Head of all the Santhali communities in the world) in Sainthia (which was in the Mohammad Bazaar townships), and the discussion of the wedding and festival rituals as presented to us by the Santhalis living in Atla. A later section discusses in detail the rituals as described by the Majhi, the ‘traditional’ and ‘correct’ manner of conduct. The Santhali community of Atla seemed to have modified their rituals in accordance with the local context, local constraints and considerations gradually gaining more importance than a strict adherence to any sense of “traditional” culture. There was an awareness of the forms of ritual conduct that were described to us by the Dishom Majhi, but little need to adhere to the same. Further, what was interesting was the relative non-importance of the Majhi of this village, who only helped adivasi people selectively, and was often described (in hushed tones, of course) as a drunkard. This is in direct contrast to the military metaphor used by the Dishom Majhi when

describing the superior organization and integration of the Santhali community.

In terms of gender, there was an interesting contrast in the roles of the body tattoos Santhali women are famously identified by. The Dishom Majhi saw these as markers of Santhali identity, and a decline in the number and size of markings as an indicator of the threat faced by Santhalis who choose to wear their identity on their body – he claims that newer generations, ashamed of their identity, choose to rid themselves of these visible markers. However, the women of the village told us that these tattoos are ‘our adornments, the one thing that men cannot remove from our bodies even after we die’. Many young women did get tattoos made. Two primary reasons were noted in those that didn’t: one, tattoos were becoming increasingly expensive, and not everyone could afford them; two, tattoos were painful to get done, and required a long healing period – some women weren’t willing to endure that pain, or didn’t have the idle time to spare for the healing. While they knew this was a traditional Santhali custom, the association the women had with these tattoos was that of their gendered identity, one that they saw as removed from a larger “Santhali” identity.

## **FIELDSITE TWO: Goriya Gram, Birbhum district, center of Uthnau**

Unlike Atla, the closest town to Goriya was Mallarpur, which was an hour away by car (Mallarpur itself was about 30-35km from where we were staying, making the travelling time around 2 hours per journey). Also unlike in the case of Atla, the Santhali population of Goriya was not separated from the caste Hindu population of the village, and there was no demarcated *para* for adivasis. The village is located in the middle of a barren patch of land, on which no agriculture is possible apart from rice, which people can only farm for one season in the year. This is due primarily due to the scarcity of water in the area. As a result, occupants of the village rear livestock and occasionally fish in order to make a living. The village is relatively self-sufficient, and while roads are being built due to the intervention of the Zilla Parishad, there is not much state intervention in everyday life otherwise. Apart from Hindus and adivasis, there is also a significant Muslim

population, who again are not physically separated from the rest of the villages. Most of the houses were made of mud, grass, bamboos, thatch and dry leaves.

Goriya was located within eye-sight (and hearing) of the mines that dot Mohammad Bazaar township, and was the site of a large scale movement in 2009-2010 that successfully stopped the further encroachment of mines within its territory. A local NGO called Uthnau (co-founded in 1996 by Kunal Deb, a social activist and journalist with a MSc degree in Economics from Calcutta University) has been working in the region over the last two decades to build community health-care facilities, basic primary-level education schools and resource centers, sustainable and renewable sources of electricity such as bicycle-powered generators and solar-powered equipment, as well as organizing legal help for the local community. During the movement, the Santhali community's present in the village fought to maintain a clean and undisturbed environment, as well as to preserve their access to basic natural resources. The attempt by Uthnau to revive and preserve traditional Santhali culture represents for them the only path that leads out of the vicious cycle of economic exploitation and social and cultural oppression. There is also a lot of discontent with the government schemes, in terms of how they are implemented and the corruption present there, especially against 'dark-skinned' adivasis, to the extent that those that go against the system receive threats. Adivasi elites also seemed to be mixing in with the local politicians and goons, and blocking the proper implementation of land laws – adivasi land that could properly only go to other adivasis were forcibly being signed over to local powerful landowners and industrial middlemen.

In Goriya, the Santhali people speaks primarily their own language, which is very different from any of the eastern languages (two native Bengali speakers were completely unable to follow conversations in rapid Santhali). Our informant in this village was a local boy, born and brought up there. He had been educated by the NGO Uthnau, and was a passionate advocate of the rights of Santhali communities to be able to self-determine their existence, free from domination and subjugation. In his words, despite India having become *shwadhin* ("independent"), the adivasis were still *poradhin* ("subjugated"), with the British conquerors having been replaced by the Indian elites as the new supreme rulers – the ground reality had remained the same. He was able to further provide an account of local politics in that area, and lamented how the local leaders would be happier to forget Santhali

culture and adapt a “mainstream” Hindu way of life, forgetting the customs and belief-systems of the adivasis. He also pointed out the role of mainstream culture (via videos and movies on television and mobile phones) that portrayed a romanticized picture of Hindu life, as well as the effect of mainstream education that further alienated Santhali youngsters from their own culture. For him, the use of traditional rituals, songs, music, dances and lifestyles was essential in protesting their oppression and could be used to generate solidarity for their struggle. The handicrafts that are being made and sold in the area are attempts to revive and market traditional handicrafts to ensure economic gains. We were shown some handicrafts made from grass that would be sold in Delhi – however, they could only expect to receive 50 rupees or less for them, which didn’t even make them viable economic practices for the effort that went into its making. He further lamented the disappearance of local crafts, stories and traditions, which were once the standard feature of each and every Santhali household – now, songs and musical styles are dying out quickly simply because there is no one who can continue that tradition any longer.

The school operated by Uthnau was run within its innovatively constructed office building: circular in shape, rising up like an elongated dome, with a half-moon well right in the middle, and the roof open to allow sunlight into the entire structure. At the time, we saw a lot of the village adivasi children rehearsing a play that they were to perform at the “Hul Dibosh”, a very important Santhali festival – the annual commemoration of the Santhal Hool, a Santhali rebellion against British colonial authorities and the upper-caste zamindari classes in 1855. The first two days of the Hul Dibosh entailed speeches and performances centred around Santhali history and culture, particularly centering on the resistance movement of the Santhal Hool. The third day was more like a carnival, with dancing and music and some stalls. Santhali people from a long way off came for this festival, and each village would even organize one such event on their own if they were unable to come to any venue. There was one elderly female teacher in charge of correcting pronunciation and grammar, two men playing different types of drums for the play, and one male leader one guy who was the choreographer for the dances within the play. We also met a senior teacher working at Uthnau, who was able to provide us with a basic understanding of how the school itself was working. While the school itself had no certification, it nonetheless was extremely efficient and flexible to the

needs of the children who came to study there. Children usually come at around 9:30am and leave at 4pm in the evening, having all their meals in the school. While the school was generally only till the 5<sup>th</sup> standard, older children also end up attending the lessons because of the better teaching in various subjects that are considered “difficult” (such as Mathematics or English). The teacher pointed out that they could not offer anything more than what the government schools in the locality could offer, and it was because of the incredibly poor quality of those schools that the NGO was able to attract so many children. The aim of their education was primarily to ensure that people didn’t get cheated, could read basic documents, keep balance sheets, etc – he repeated several times that such aspirations as becoming doctors or lawyers were just not possible in horizon, at least not for the current generation.

### **Various Mining Sites, Birbhum district – Broad surveys and observations**

**SAINTHIA:** The main Hul Dibosh celebration was to be held on a ground with a large tent for the performances and audience, and two full size statues of two men on the other side – one pointing a loaded bow, and the other pointing his finger ahead of him. Because of the heavy rain however, the venue had been shifted to a nearby indoor hall. We sat through some of the performances (which were all in Santhali), and were introduced to the Dishom Majhi, the supreme leader of the Santhali community. He is the official representation of what the community is supposed to be, and as such blamed outside influences and individual character failings for the current state of affairs in the Santhali community. When we enquired about the difference between his official representation and what we had observed in Atla for instance, he laughed it off, saying that they have forgotten the correct way and need to be taught again. He instead talked repeatedly about how people who’d forgotten their root identities were lost.

He said that people believed there was bride price in Santhali community, but that in actuality when the mother of the bride was asked what she expected, it was a symbolic question. Prices were set at Rs. 3, 5, 7, etc., but each of these denoted a tier of goods that the bride’s family was expected to give to her, and also things that they wouldn’t. For example, Rs. 3 would mean that they would give her some jewellery, maybe regular clothes, but would not give wedding dress,

ornaments or anything else at all. Hence then the groom's family would know that they would have to arrange the rest. As price went up, list of things the bride's family gave went up. Hence, this price acts as a symbolic price. However, if someone who was a non-Santhali were to ask how much the marriage was arranged for and the bride's family would say 3, they'd make fun saying that the amount is nothing, how could one exchange their child for that little an amount. This would then affect the Santhali person too, who would also not be able to counter this claim of 3 being nothing. Since the tiered system is not traditionally expressed out loud, they couldn't explain it and were made to feel inferior and hence changed the system in places. He also talked about their divorce rituals, which were negotiated through the village head as opposed to individual parents, how there is a counselling session for the couple and if they can't reconcile then the girl returns to her natal village but as a part of the head's family - she's completely his responsibility thereon. Remarriage is allowed, not frowned upon. He then said that modern day courts and laws were disrupting their system - first, they encouraged divorce through the practice of compensation from the husband, which he felt was unneeded if the woman had family to support her; then, the way justice was delivered relied on the use of witnesses who could easily be bought and hence the more powerful person and not the correct one would win the case.

He then talked about the role of education, how it can be used both harmfully and beneficially for the community. He lamented how history doesn't mention the Adivasi communities at all, and indeed at many time tries to deny their very existence. He thought that the strong point of the community was its political organisation – a hierarchical arrangement of tiers, with branches of officers and intermediaries under him organized like in the military (his comparison). So his job is simply to inform the next level, who'll inform their juniors and so forth till it spreads to the lowest level very quickly. He feels that this system is one of the things that is holding the entire community together, that the Santhali people themselves were favouring this system, realising that they needed it to stay integrated as a community.

**PACHAMI HATGACHA:** Located in the Mohammad Bazaar township, this is where some of the worst mining is taking place. Mines are often less than 10 feet away from a village (as opposed to the minimum regulated distance of 200m from the beginning of the village to the perimeter of the mine), and incidents of injury,

disease and death are almost innumerable. Mining and stone blasting is often done with next to no attention to safety regulations or prior warning, and the very air and ground has been permanently destroyed by such activities. We were able to only go to a few places alternatively on foot and by bike, being escorted around by a member of the NGO Uthnau who worked in the area.

We noticed the following about this area:

**A. Money Extraction and Alcoholism:** Whereas the problem of alcoholism had been present to an extent in both Atla and Goriya (in the case of Atla, the practice was greatly reduced due to the efforts of the local community to ensure its control), it was much more widespread in this area. The primary concern for the people living around the mines was also that not only was agriculture and livestock next to permanently ruined, but even the job opportunities that they could have created were now greatly reduced due to mechanization of all its processes. Women would often lay down big logs with lots of branches in front of trucks carrying stones, or plastic pipes studded with nails for bursting tires, and demand a toll of 20-50 rupees for it to pass. Seeing as nearly every village on the road would have a gang of women occupied like this, they were able to considerably bleed the truck-drivers who would otherwise not be allowed to pass. Men who could once work the fields were now rendered without occupation, and would often receive money from the mine-owners in order to stay out of the way and avoid causing ruckus.

According to an old infirm women living in this area for many years, people squander away the money because they haven't really "earned" it, and thus are not aware of the value of the money. Yet what was interesting was the way in which they acquired the money in the first place: the memory of the 2010 movement was clearly very fresh, for it was used as a leveraging point in order to extract drinking money. They would threaten the truck-drivers that, should they not pay them, they would make sure to organize another movement and stop the mines from operating smoothly. As one of the teachers in the Uthnau school in Gariya had wryly remarked, "Once the Santhalis come out with their bows and arrows, their numbers and bravery can outmatch any other opponent, even those with guns – everyone who sees such a sight runs away in fear". Those managing the mines (themselves



aware of the history of the movement, and fearing the repercussions of disrupting the daily functioning of the mines) would usually make sure they were paid. To them, the cost of paying up was negligible as compared to the cost of disrupting even a day's running. But to the women who acquired the money, it would be to help them feed their families.

- B. Disease and Diagnosis:** The rampant spread of silicosis, coupled with the proclivity for alcoholism, meant that the death toll in most villages was quite high. Indeed, if the true death rates were reported, most mine-owners would have to answer a lot of uncomfortable questions regarding the flouting of safety regulations and norms. More significantly, they would be legally obliged to pay a sum of over 4 lakh rupees to all those diagnosed with the disease. As such, silicosis was forcibly prevented from being diagnosed correctly in the region, with the symptoms of heavy coughing of blood and shortness of breath being misdiagnosed as tuberculosis. Patients were treated for TB, which was completely useless as a cure and in fact exacerbated the effects through wrongful medication. We were witness to the way in which X-ray scans were almost smuggled out of the area in order to be diagnosed elsewhere, so as to be able to come up with proof as to the lack of any sort of safety considerations.
- C. Difference in Perspectives:** Finally, it was interesting to also note that in contrast to the narratives provided by politically active members of adivasi communities as well as the NGO spokespeople, the local Bengali Hindu community seemed relatively better off post the entry of the mines. This was due to the caste restrictions on Hindus against agricultural work in this region, as told to us by one of the Hindu informants in the region. Similarly, Christian adivasis who worked in the mines were also relatively apathetic towards the efforts of the NGO and the adivasi activists, who in turn betrayed a sense of disgust and annoyance at their Christian brethren for “betraying” them. What was also readily apparent was the difference in knowledge and levels of agency between these two groups, betraying a divide even within the adivasi communities.