CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The effect of poverty has been variously examined in the context of stratified civilized societies and there already exists a wide body of literature on the subject (Whyte 1943, Harrington 1962, Gans 1962, Lewis 1965, Fonessa 1971, Dantwala 1973, Desai 1970). But it has not adequately been examined at the level of preliterate tribal communities. In the present dissertation I will try to trace the impact of poverty on the Hill Kharia society and explore how far some of their intra-community behaviour as well as the pattern of inter-community interaction may be explained as due to the consequence of their socio-economic condition.

Anthropologists have long been accustomed to view the "primitive cultures" in the Rousseauian mould as being homogeneous, satisfying, having a perfect fit between nature and society, and above all possessing a "genuine culture" (Sapir 1964). Therefore, instances of study showing disorganization or drastic alteration in the "primitive cultures" have been very few with the exceptions of Holmberg (1950), Honigmann (1949) and Gardner (1966). And it is not surprising that the existence of concept of poverty and its impact on the "primitive cultures" were even more emphatically denied. Thus Oscar Lewis whose heuristic concept of "culture of
poverty" attracted much criticism on methodological, analytical and ethical grounds, repudiated that poverty had any impact on the preliterate people. He averred that:

Many of the primitive or preliterate peoples studied by anthropologists suffer from dire poverty which is the result of poor technology and/or poor natural resources, or of both but they do not have the traits of subculture of poverty. In spite of their poverty they have a relatively integrated, satisfying and self-sufficient culture. (1966, XLVIII).

Although Lewis reasoned that the analytical concept of culture of poverty was not applicable to the preliterate communities anthropologists, in general, were of the view that hunting and gathering societies all over the world led a wretched existence, hard put to meet their basic needs until Marshal Sahlins made a reappraisal of the "material process of life" of these societies. After examining the economic condition of hunting and gathering tribes of Africa, Australia, Oceania and South America Sahlins came to the conclusion that these societies far from being poverty-stricken were really the "original affluent society" (Sahlins 1972). Deprecating the tendency among anthropologists to impute the so-called "bourgeois" concept of civilized societies' needs on the hunting and gathering communities, he pointed out that there could be more than one way to cope with want. Apart from the civilized societies' perennial effort to bridge the irreconcilable gap between scarce resources and human wants there may also be another solution to poverty, namely, the Zen solution which views the "human material wants" as "finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate". Sahlins pointed out that by "adopting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty with a low standard of living" (ibid: 2). He demonstrated that hunting and gathering societies enjoyed a "kind of material
plenty" which they underutilized and generally remained contented with the fulfilment of their limited culturally determined requirements:

The World's most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization. (ibid : 37)

But not all hunting and gathering societies all over the world enjoy material plenty which they can exploit at their will. Sahlins himself also noted (ibid : 8) that in many places hunting and gathering tribes were pushed to inhospitable terrains. In the Indian mainland, most of the hunting and gathering societies have long been denied isolation and surrounded by more dominant ethnic groups who have literally encysted them. Consequently, they have also been denied the privilege to exclusive exploitation of an ecological niche. Sinha (1969) characterized the hunting and gathering societies of the Indian mainland as "secondarily primitivized". He pointed out that the exclusive dependence of hunting and gathering tribes of mainland India is a case of "devolution" from shifting cultivation, in response to the penetration of caste based economy into these areas and extensive deforestation which make the earlier pattern of primary dependence on shifting cultivation untenable (ibid : 164).

Some anthropologists have noted that even in this "secondarily primitivized" condition hunting and gathering tribes of India could not rely exclusively on forest. Bose (1956) described the Birhor as a sort of caste performing and enjoying an exclusive economic role vis-a-vis the peasants. Fox (1969) saw their role as "professional primitives" who, because of their knowledge of forest ecology, could gather various
forest produce and supply these to the peasants who needed these and had otherwise no avenue to acquire them. But within the past few decades the insistant demand of land by peasants also destroyed their last refuge, the forest. As an inevitable consequence they are now being increasingly drawn into market relationship. The peasant societies that are already entrenched in the area made their effort to acquire new means of production, namely, land all the more difficult. Barring a few cases of exceptional success most of these relentlessly-pushed-about-people set up a marginal economic and social relationship with the peasants. From the viewpoint of relations of production and access to the means of production they now constitute a category of "have nots". Although they are unable to coalesce with other such groups of "have nots" living in the village, their relation with the landed peasants and perception of the situation have a close similarity with the "class situation" that is hard to ignore.

The Problem

The Hill Kharia of Purulia and Singhbum districts, with whom we are concerned here, underwent secondary primitivization descending down the evolutionary scale from shifting cultivation to hunting and gathering (Sinha 1969). In the 1930's they were studied by two perceptive practitioners of anthropology, namely, Das (1931) and Roy (1937). The impression of the quality of life of the tribe that these two anthropologists gave were polar opposites. Das who studied the Hill Kharia for a short period in a hamlet of a village situated near Ghatulia in Dhalbhum district of Bihar found them morose and dejected. While Roy (1937) found in the Hill Kharia living in the adjacent district of
Mayurbhanj of Orissa nothing abnormal. The people were happily pursuing their way of life and generally gave an impression of having great repose in their existential situation.

Nowadays the Hill Kharia find that due to large scale denudation of forest hunting and gathering as an exclusive mode of subsistence is no longer possible. Instead they are now compelled to seek anchorage in the agricultural economy of the region. In the present day they are frequently found as an appendage of the village society frantically searching for an existence in a receding forest and as agricultural labourer. Not only has their previous base of economy been destroyed but their concept of "good life" has also been irrevocably changed. The Hill Kharia view their situation in contrast to the peasants as lacking certain desirable things like cultivable land and food. This has generated a notion of being poor relative to the peasants. Although this is a subjective assessment of the situation it fairly corresponds to the reality.

Periodic hunger perhaps, is apart of hunters and gathers' way of life. That the Hill Kharia also know the existence of such contingent situation is evident from their adage, "shikar naito bhikari" (with failure of hunting one becomes destitute). But previously they were secure in their belief in the bounteouness of the forest and if one failed to hunt on a particular day it was looked upon as due to sheer concatenation of several uncontrollable factors, mainly of magical nature. It was believed that the next day they were bound to reap rich harvest. But at the present day the Hill Kharia do not have any faith in the bounteouness of the nature. Rather the spectre of starvation stares them in the face constantly.
Their heart is not kindled by any hope that the morrow will bring better prospect. It is noteworthy that of the three kinds of starvation reported by Gupta (1977: 88) from among the tribals of Gujarat the Hill Kharia suffer from the most severe kind of starvation, that is, they have to go without the two principal meals for days on end periodically and practically subsist on one meal a day for a prolonged period.

It may also be pointed out that the peasant society has become the reference group for them to emulate. They are constantly reminded that although they are severely handicapped by lack of food, the peasants, at least a major section of them, are relatively free from it.

Another additional feature of the Hill Kharia society is the "stigma" of being "criminal". We use the word "stigma" in the sense that Goffman (1963) has used:

While the stranger is present before us evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind — in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our mind from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma (ibid: 2 - 3).

How the Hill Kharia came to be known as "criminal," though could not be ascertained, it was known to be fairly old. Even at the beginning of early part of twentieth century Coupland (1911) mentioned the Hill Kharias' participation in various kinds of criminal activities like burglary, stealing, etc. (ibid: 82). As a consequence of this stigma they came under the purview of "Criminal Tribe Act" of 1924 declared by the then British Government. Although this Act was repealed in 1952 and the Hill Kharia
were designated as a "Denotified Tribe" the stigma has stuck. The police still behave towards the tribe as if any person born as Hill Kharia automatically becomes a criminal and makes oneself a possible target of arrest at the slightest pretext. This situation, coupled with the marginal position of the tribe in the regional society, has generated in the mind of the tribe a notion of powerlessness and anxiety.

Thus the relative deprivation suffered by the Hill Kharia may be categorised under three heads: (1) felt economic deprivation, 2) marginality of the Hill Kharia vis-à-vis the rural society, 3) notion of powerlessness vis-à-vis the peasant society. All the three factors act in unison and have a cumulative effect to generate the notion of relative deprivation and its consequence on the Hill Kharia society.

Hypotheses

The problem of studying the impact of poverty on the Hill Kharia society was approached with the following hypotheses in mind:

(1) A proper understanding of the social organization and cultural pattern of the Hill Kharia will have to be based on an analysis of the situation of the felt economic deprivation of the tribe relative to the peasants among whom the tribe happens to live.

(2) Conditions of deprivation will have an impact on their core social structure and institutions, constraining their optimal operation.

(3) Some identifiable adaptive social and cultural devices may be found in the Hill Kharia society in response to the situation of poverty that they suffer from. These will be reflected in their mode of socialization and rationalization of the felt situation of deprivation.

(4) A proper understanding of the so-called "criminal tendencies" and activities among the Hill Kharia has to be done in terms of analysis of their adaptive strategies in a situation of deprivation.
The Area of Study

The Hill Kharia inhabit the border districts situated at the trijunction of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa states. In West Bengal they are mainly found in Purulia district. Apart from this, they are found to inhabit some adjacent police stations of Bankura and Midnapur districts. The present work was mainly done in Purulia district. However, field work was carried out for a short period in a Hill Kharia village situated in the hilly tracts of Singhbhum district of Bihar.

Research Method

I began field work among the Hill Kharia in the month of September 1974 and ended the first phase of data collection by the end of January, 1975. The last phase of field work was taken up in 1977 when about three months' work was done from April, 1977 to July, 1977. Between these two phases short field trips of a fortnight to a month's duration were undertaken in the months of June, 1975, February and April, 1976.

Before taking up this project I carried out intensive study of a slum in Calcutta where I studied the effect of poverty on the socio-cultural life of the slum dwellers (Sinha 1972). After completion of the project it was felt that we need to probe into the "primitive cultures" for an understanding of the possible impact of felt economic deprivation on the society. We decided to study the Hill Kharia tribe of Purulia district because this tribe has been suffering
from great economic hardship due to erosion of their former economic base in the forest which may have led them to an adaptive strategy that marked them for their so-called "criminal" nature.

A village named Bandhodabari in Bundwan police station of Purulia district was first selected for intensive study of the Hill Kharia society. This Hill Kharia village was sheltered under a barren hillock situated close to the neighbouring multi-ethnic village, Sirishgarha. The village was chosen for two reasons. It was fairly close to the villages of other peasant groups and it had a sizable Hill Kharia population. But when I first went to Purulia for field work the road communicating the village with Purulia district was cut off due to monsoon and consequent bad road condition.

Therefore, we selected a fresh village in Hura police station, namely, Kulabahal which conformed to the criteria mentioned above. The data presented in this dissertation are mainly based on the intensive study of this village. Later on we also studied three other villages, one each in Purulia, Hura and Puncha police stations for cross-checking the data collected from Kulabahal. To study the situational context in which the Hill Kharias live I also visited a few villages in Manbazar, Puncha, and Bundwan police stations.

The Hill Kharia of Purulia, Singhbhum, Bankura and Midnapur live not only in proximity with the peasants but also in a few places like Bankura they have even become totally dependent on agricultural labour. Nevertheless, it was hoped that in and around the Dalma hill
range in Patamda police station (district: Singhbhum) we would find Hill Kharias who depended, even now, to a great extent on forest for getting their subsistence and thus would provide a contrastive perspective to the Hill Kharia of Purlia. For this purpose we chose a village called Laraidungri, a village nestled under the hilly tract of the Dalma range.

Utilizing the conventional tools used by social anthropologists, e.g., participant observation, observation, interview, census, case history, etc., I collected data from the Hill Kharia as well as from the other ethnic groups living in Kulabahal. To understand the economic transactions, social relationship, and "criminal tendencies" of the tribe it was necessary to study them in relation to the ethnic groups living around them. Therefore, extension of our enquiry beyond the narrow domain of the Hill Kharia hamlet became an absolute necessity.

My first experience of studying a tribal community, which started with the Hill Kharia tribe, proved to be a difficult task. Centuries of prosecution as so-called criminals has left an indelible mark on their behaviour. They are highly suspicious of any outsider, especially of the so-called educated, shirt and trouser attired babu from urban areas. On the first day as soon as I reached the hamlet all adult male members fled to the nearest thickets. Only kids and women could be accosted. But they just refused to interact with me. On the second day I requested Swami Sivananda Giri, who was a local man and had established a high school near the village and was thus
held in high esteem for his social service, to accompany me. His shouts drew out a thin man from a hut. He said that for the last two days he and his family had not eaten anything. That morning he had borrowed a little kodo (cultivated grass seed) from a peasant which proved to be of an intoxicating variety and had made him sleepy. He obviously looked weak from hunger. Swamiji introduced me to the man and through him I explained my purpose of the visit.

Thus I launched my field work among the Hill Kharia. I expected that as the intensity of my rapport would improve the quality and quantity of data would also increase. But this was not to be so. I found that the Hill Kharia did not communicate with outsiders with facility. I thought that the difference in speech habit between my informants and I perhaps hindered communication. When I acquired some knowledge about their dialect I found the same difficulty of conversing with them persisted. Moreover, their suspicion about my motive also remained. I tried to circumvent this by doing voluntary social work for them which no person from higher ethnic group usually came forward to do. Thus, the months of September–October being the most difficult period for them as far as food supply was concerned, I tried to persuade the Block Development Officer to allocate gratuitous relief for them. On a few occasions I did succeed. Another opportunity also came to me. A primary school was being organized by three young boys of the locality in the Hill Kharia hamlet. These young boys were trying their utmost to get the government's recognition for the school. The powerful village faction that was then at the helm of the village affairs and controlled the Gram Panchayat was also trying various tricks one after the other, to dislodge these teachers from the hamlet and get a school sanctioned
for their main hamlet which was inhabited by the major ethnic groups and where their own relatives could be installed as teachers of the school. The Hill Kharia were helpless spectators to all these manoeuvres and were themselves subjected to various kinds of pressures and counter-pressures. Without being overtly aligned with any factions I tried to plead with the district authorities and impress upon them the importance of the school to the poor Hill Kharia. Although I did not succeed in securing the recognition of the government for a school among the Hill Kharia I hoped that with my sincere effort to help them I would be able to generate a measure of confidence and trust for me in the minds of the Hill Kharia.

But even all these did not carry me far in getting them disclose why they were being drawn in criminal activities. Even when I confronted them with concrete evidence of their involvement in criminal activities as I learnt from the other villagers they dismissed these vehemently as micha katha (lies).

Ultimately this apparently insurmountable barrier was overcome by the most unexpected manner. After about three months of my return to Calcutta from the first phase of field work, I received a pathetic letter from the Hill Kharia of Kulabahal written through the primary teachers of the hamlet. The letter stated that six of their relatives were arrested by the police from a marriage ceremony for alleged involvement in dacoities in two adjacent villages. They hoped that I would be able to rescue them from this difficult situation and promised that this time if I visited them they would make a clean
breast of everything (Appendix-1). I seized the opportunity of establishing rapport by both hands, although I could not help them so far as their release from prison was concerned.

That said, it may be pointed out here that although the ruse employed by me helped me to realise my goal I could not fail to notice the eagerness with which the people tried to keep alive their relationship with me, with the fond hope that I would help them to tide over various crises that emanate from their interaction with village society and the police. As it usually happened in course of such interaction in field situation the benefit of relationship thus developed was wholly balanced in favour of me while the prosecuted, hapless, and helpless people remained where they were.

Finally, it may be noted that in the pages that follow the major emphasis has been given on analysing the problem itself. Keeping in view the focus of the dissertation, I have given the ethnographical data wherever necessary.