CHAPTER 4

ANALYSING ‘UNDERDEVELOPMENT’ AMONG THE HOS

4.1. Background and Introduction

The present chapter serves as a prelude to the enquiry of dispossession politics as rooted in the inter-play of local factors viz. ethnicity, class, legal provisions, politics and so on. Providing a sketch of the adivasi dominated society in West Singhbhum, this chapter explains the causes of under-development by analysing the local politics and existing power equations. Contesting the “cosmetic” notion of homogeneity and egalitarianism attributed to adivasi society, this chapter also explains how state institutions and competitive social norms have pervaded the village societies. In doing so, the panchayat election of 2010 serves as a point of entry which has not only made the already existing social cleavages explicit but has further widened them. The analysis provides credence to the argument that the tribal societies marked by social fissures and contestation over power have a bearing on anti-dispossession resistance struggles. Moreover, the reason why under-development is analysed is due to the fact that it facilitates the processes of land acquisition by tilting the power equations in favour of industrial firms. This will set the context for further exploring under-development as the supply side reason for the dispossession of people.

Jharkhand still lags in most of the development indicators like health, education, employment etc. (Appendix Table 2). Apart from the existing policies for tribals, a significant part of this backwardness can be attributed to the official understanding of the tribe. Even though anthropologists have attempted to study tribal society as a dynamic entity under transition, the government is still hanging on to the colonial notions of tribalism. Recently, many works have established the heterogeneity within the adivasi groups and their changed cultural preferences (Nathan & Kelkar, 2003; Chandra, 2013). Class homogeneity is normally absent amongst the adivasis who have benefitted not only due to presence in mainstream politics but also government’s affirmative policies of reservation in State jobs (Corbridge, 2000). Moreover, this change has resulted into the emergence of intra-group power relations wherein the elites enjoy power over their subaltern brethrens.
through the active consent of the latter. This is done in the name of common cultural heritage and identity. Although Xaxa (2005:1363) has argued about the assertion of adivasi identity by the middle-class adivasi people as a claim from “within”, he has landed short of identifying the problems in portrayal of homogenous identity. The case study of Panchayat elections in West Singhbhum helps to substantiate the argument that the adivasi community also features divisive politics and attempts of fomenting collective action in terms of identity is “aggrieved37”.

The chapter is organised into six sections including the present section. Second section engages critically with the existing literature on tribe and attempts to inform the official definition by highlighting the changing attributes of the community. Evolution of ethnicity among the Ho adivasi of West Singhbhum and its use in contemporary politics is attempted in the third section. This section also provides an insight into the historical trajectory of Ho society, culture and politics. In the fourth section an analysis of socio-political domain as existing and responding to the panchayat elections has been attempted. The penultimate section presents empirical evidences to analyse the underlying fissures in the social domain and understand the incongruence between customary and democratic panchayat institutions. The chapter concludes by providing a brief summary of the existing underdevelopment and social divisions.

4.2. Reframing adivasi life and society through literature

‘Tribe’ is a British construct of the 19th century for the ‘indigenous’ people or adivasis earlier know as janas (Devalle 1992: 32; Xaxa 1999: 1519). The janas connoted an identity framed in contradistinction to the attributes of the jatis and were thought to be living an isolated life in close vicinity of nature fulfilling their needs (Xaxa 1999: 1519). Although the attributes of tribes were identified by the British, they were regarded as ‘un-civilised’ and the latter took upon themselves the task of civilising them. In post-independence India, the state adopted the role of a guardian for its entire population and took the responsibility for their development. The issue of

37 “Aggrieved” identity refers to the construction of identity around receding or decaying cultural imagery and used as a discourse to counter the dominant developmental ideology. Ritambhara Hebban (2011) has stated the hazards of fomenting such an identity as it can go against the internal solidarity of any movement. However, the aggrieved identity can also be equated with Amita Baviskar’s (2005) proposal for creating an ‘ambiguous identity’ capable of transcending the minor differences to stand up for some major concern.
tribal development and administration commenced a debate regarding the nature of process to be followed. Nehru’s advisor on tribal affairs Verrier Elwin, who initially advocated the policy of ‘isolation’ later conceded in favour of ‘integration’ (Guha 2001: 262) ruling out Ghurye’s ‘assimilation’\(^38\). Integration was adopted as the virtuous middle-path with the intent of safeguarding the ‘identity and culture’ of the adivasis while integrating them with the ‘mainstream’. Affirmative policies of reservation in state jobs, reservation of seats in Parliament and State legislature along with autonomy in self-governance became the means of achieving integration. In fact, separate provisions to govern tribal areas were made under Schedule V and VI of the constitution.

Scheduled tribe population is around 10.43 crore constituting 8.6 per cent of the total Indian population (Census 2011). Concentrated mainly in central, eastern and north-eastern parts of India, adivasis are scattered almost over the entire geographical area of the country. Although not in a majority in any of the central Indian states, they have substantial population in Chhattisgarh (32%), Jharkhand (26.2%) and Odisha (22%) (Census2011). But unlike Odisha or Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand has the distinction of being governed by tribal leaders since its formation on 15\(^{th}\) November 2000. Credit for this can be given to the seven decades long Jharkhand movement veering around political self-determination of the adivasis. However, having tribal leaders at its helm for the last fourteen years has not improved the condition of adivasis in Jharkhand as they still languish in poverty like their counterparts elsewhere. Large-scale migration in the wake of displacement or search of jobs owing to loss or lack of livelihood, bureaucratic corruption hindering the percolation of welfare measures, problem of elite capture and several other reasons may be held accountable for the backwardness of the tribals. Among several others one basic issue concerning the governance of adivasis relates to an understanding of the community. Insofar as tribal elites are at the helm of the political affairs, portrayal of adivasis as a homogenous group acquires a political undertone serving the purpose of the rulers. Thus, a paradoxical situation arises under which maintenance of a separate tribal ethnicity is important for their political assertion on the one hand, and identifying the

\(^{38}\) Assimilation as a policy was to be based on Ghurye’s belief that the tribals were the ‘backward Hindus’. N K Bose also elaborated upon the process of tribal assimilation into Hindu religion and cited the caste-based expertise in production to fulfill increasing needs of the tribals as the reason behind their integration.
changing contours of adivasi ethnicity is necessary for their governance, on the other. Thus, we can see that the understanding of the adivasis was/is never bereft of politics and Social Anthropologists like Beteille stated that,

Ethnographic material from India did not figure prominently in the general discussion regarding the definition of tribe. The problem in India was to identify rather than define tribes, and scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones. This is not to say that those engaged in drawing up lists of Indian tribes did not have their own conception of tribe, but those conceptions were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. (Beteille 1986: 299)

Subscribing to an evolutionary approach of defining tribes, the policy makers in India have largely viewed them in a dichotomy with either the state or religion and caste. The official view, thus, neglects the perspective which identifies the tribal society as one evolving as per the internal dynamics of the community. However, several Anthropologists have disregarded the evolutionary approach in defining or identifying tribes and rather adopt historical approach considering only the fact that they existed outside the state and civilisation (Beteille, 1986; Xaxa, 1999). In order to get over the dichotomous analysis of the tribe either in comparison to caste and religion or state the anthropologists in India use the term ‘tribe in transition’ to capture the dynamics of tribal society (Beteille 1986: 316). Another definitional aspect is related to tribal identity and traces the change in the defining agency. Xaxa (2005: 1363) states that in the early post-independence years identity formation among the tribes was “a process from without” where non-tribals were largely active. However, in the recent times it has become “a process directed from within” spearheaded by a growing middle class from the community.

Tribes in India can be identified as groups living simultaneously under the authority of both the state and the community where the latter is gradually conceding space for the former. Nevertheless, the encroachment of communal sphere is not without conflicts based on identity defined in terms of customs, traditions etc. and articulated exclusively in comparison to ‘others’. However, these ‘others’ had not always remained exclusive to the tribals. Beteille (1986: 309) stated that, historical records suggest ‘integration at the top’ whenever tribal kingdoms were established.
following Hindu model. Usually, the tribal leaders started practicing Hinduism which was followed by the subjects. He also argues that ‘integration at the bottom’ must have taken place through economic forces which compelled the tribals to enter the larger division of labour (Beteille 1986: 309). Existence of non-adivasis in the villages of West Singbhum for their symbiotic existence approves of this hypothesis. However, despite the integration of the tribals during medieval times their identity and culture was never threatened; though certain homology can be found if we compare tribals with individual castes (Beteille 1986: 310-311). Xaxa (1999, 2005) also approves of this view and argues that just because the tribals follow social practices similar to that of Hindus or other religion they cannot be identified as them.

Identifying the problem with policy-making, Xaxa (1999:1520) asserts that the tribals are still perceived through the established anthropological works. It is assumed that they are moving towards absorption in the caste or religious groups due to the forces of mainstream societies whereas, in reality there exists a more complex scenario with the tribals perceiving themselves as community with their notion of religious and cultural identity (Xaxa 2005: 1363). But Xaxa looks at the middle class adivasi group as the agency responsible for creating this ‘identity’ and fails to confirm whether the same belief is upheld by the common adivasis. In his assertions, Xaxa is up against the discourse of integration which assumes the unintended but gradual and complete absorption of the tribal in the caste or religious societies. However, scholars analysing the role of integration also have substantial evidence to support their claim.

One method of integration, called ‘state formation’ is supposed to have provided the decisive socio-political framework for the transformation of the tribal system through participation in official practices like elections, development projects, vocational training etc. (as quoted in Xaxa 1999:1520). Contesting such claims, scholars like Alpa Shah (2010) have stated that the tribals in Jharkhand participated in state-conducted elections to ‘keep the state away’ and preserve their customary institutions through sacral politics. But we can see that the tribals have selectively chosen to receive benefits from the state because policy of economic integration through reservation of jobs was never questioned. In fact, there are instances of ‘retribalisation’ through which communities like Kurmi-Mahato in Jharkhand and
**Gujjars** in Rajasthan are agitating to gain Scheduled Tribe status. And, even when the tribals strive to ‘keep the state away’ it is not always the mandate of the entire community (Shah 2010; Chandra 2013). Thus, the problem with both the discourse of integration and Xaxa seems to be the same. Both have overlooked the dynamics within the adivasi society, thus, neglecting the power relations existing between them.

Capturing the changes brought about in tribal societies, Nathan and Kelkar (2003: 1955) stated that the socio-economic system of the tribals has moved from one based on ‘stability and self-consumption’ to one based on ‘accumulation and market-orientation’. They argued that although accumulation was inhibited in many tribal groups, its denouncement by the Christians as ‘pagan’ rites made the tribals switch over to accumulation (Kelkar 2003: 1955). But the authors did not pay much attention to the case of affirmative policies which played a bigger role in creating the tribal elite and growing inequality in the community. Thus, initial subscription to integration itself has aggravated the social inequalities. Hence, contravening the social realities, any assumption that tribal societies are the realm of true liberty will make the attempts of its revival redundant. Raising similar concerns during appraisal of human rights movement (HRM), Gudavarthy (2013) states that

> What the project of citizenship – through a ‘rights-based civil society’ – did with its provision for formal and legal equality in shrouding the social hierarchies in the first phase of the HRM, the idea of civil society as pure ‘realm of freedom’ bereft of power relations did in the ‘democratic rights’ phase. Here the oppressions in civil society were treated as ‘dysfunctions in civil society’. (Ajay Gudavarthy, 2013:48)

Despite all these changes observed in the tribal society, belief is gaining ground that even if civilisational practices like changing mode of production and modern lifestyle is being practised by them they still are the ‘others’ of mainstream society. Articulation of selective attributes like identity and self-determination is now being claimed through movements (Xaxa, 1999). All this is happening amidst the fact that adivasi societies are heterogeneous and all the tribals do not perceive the state similarly. Their action ranges from complete alienation and armed resistance to strategic use of availing political benefits. As analysed later in this chapter, nature of protests against the panchayat election itself is a testimony to the fact that there are wide fissures within the tribal society. Likewise, the *Ho* tribal dominated society of
West Singhbhum equally shares the concern over the dilution of its traditional social fabric. However, despite these changes making inroads into the adivasi society what has impinged upon the public imagination is the romantic notion of an egalitarian adivasi society. Applying the approach of Political Anthropology, we will further interrogate the claim of egalitarianism within the tribal society. Nevertheless, we first need to understand the historical trajectory of the Ho society and the evolution of their identity from being a tribe to becoming an adivasi\textsuperscript{39}. The latter having an ethnic connotation is more in vogue in the present times for articulating political demands as a different constituency.

### 4.3. Evolution of ethnicity among the Hos of West Singhbhum

Scholars have written extensively about the adivasis of Jharkhand ever since the colonial era. The village and settlement records of that time along with other non-official documents serves as the historical evidence to identify their attributes. These documents while being very rich in their description of the adivasi society have also captured the political, economic and other dimensions. However, we can identify two streams of writers amongst a host of scholars using these records for a historical enquiry into the nature of the tribal society. One group comprises of those who have remained appreciative of the official views and advocate the further integration of the tribal society into the ‘mainstream’ discourse. Second group belongs to those who disregard the official account on the ground of conspiracy to fabricate the truth for the sake of establishing foreign administration. The second group, in the post-independence era, contested the assimilationist agenda of the writers like Ghurye and others who tried to absorb tribe under the Hindu fold. This kind of intellectual divide on histories is not new and is largely driven by issues of ideological convenience. Hence, the ‘politics of history writing’ cannot be ignored and must serve as a guiding light to avoid determinism in framing a society and its people. But what is equally important is to curb the nostalgic presentation of the societies by a few to serve some concurrent political ambitions. It is this contestation of ‘the history’ with ‘the present’ which makes it mandatory to dialectically arrive at a position having more real content. Nonetheless, such an enquiry becomes even more important in a situation

\textsuperscript{39} Tribe is the official construct primarily used for administrative and governance purposes whereas adivasi has a connotation framed in context of indigeneity and evolves to be the basis of a separate ethnicity. Susanna Devalle (1992) has explained how the construction of tribe as a group has acquired ethnic dimension and informed the community consciousness for political and social assertiveness.
when a group/community makes their identity a basis of contest with the powerful discourse of capitalist development. Any articulation of antagonism on fabricated grounds, e.g. of ‘aggrieved identity’ will render the protest movement weak and vulnerable to manoeuvring by the capitalist forces.

In an attempt to understand the ethnicity of the Ho tribals of West Singhbhum, we will analyse the picture sketched by different scholars either on the basis of historical evidences or their direct experience with them. However, any such exercise will be futile if it is secluded from the macro politics of State formation in Jharkhand because of the Ho adivasis being at the epicenter of such demand. Jharkhand movement, in its almost seventy years long journey was regularly reframed by reconsidering the changing situation. Although embraced initially as an ethnic movement, the realpolitik of state formation compelled its leaders to garner support from the non-tribal section. In spite of accepting the heterogeneity on ethnic lines, it never allowed the discourse of adivasi identity to wither away in the light of changed social realities. Representation of the adivasis as the ethnic group sharing trivial but virtuous attributes of egalitarianism, seclusion, and self-sustaining lifestyle was the plank upon which the identity was constructed. Though it is not very hard to imagine the context in which such an articulation was taking place, the domain was not devoid of voices contesting the tribal ethnicity of the people of Jharkhand. Even though an attempt to define ethnicity will be out of place, it will be fruitful to understand the path traversed by the construct of ‘tribe’ to acquire ethnic dimension. While tribe is a social construct having civilisational aspects ethnicity helps the subordinate groups to oppose the domination by the ‘others’ through,

reaffirming their threatened historical and cultural specificity and by forging alternative social projects. Ethnic consciousness may then serve as a strategic axis for solidarity and for political action at one moment in the development of social movements. (Susanna B C Devalle 1992: 28)

As we are concerned with tracing the changing nature of the Ho tribal society and its modalities of asserting ethnicity, a discussion of the shifting tropes of Ho social protest is imminent here. Originally belonging to the Munda adivasi group, the Hos used to reside in Chotanagpur but were forced by Oraon tribals and the Hindus to move towards North Singhbhum, where they settled peacefully with the Bhuiyans and
the Singh dynasty of the Porahat (Sen, 2012b). Later on, after acquiring political ambitions they moved further South of Singhbhum and subdued the Saraks to establish their homeland called Kolhan. Thus, the Hos had transformed from being a masochistic one inflicting the suffering of migration on one-self to one being militant (ibid.). Because of their dreadful fighting capability the Hos were regarded as Larka (fighting) Kol and their ethnicity was framed strictly in terms of their territorial sovereignty.

Ethnicity in the context of Ho adivasi society of West Singhbhum was used even during the colonial era to counter the intended political intervention. Although, partially subdued during 1821 the conquest of the Kolhan and its conversion into British-controlled administrative unit named Kolhan Government Estate was completed in February 1837 by British Captain Thomas Wilkinson (ibid.). Drawing a parallel with Scott’s “weapons of the weak” in the Ho society, Sen (2012b) argues that once convinced about their position vis-à-vis the Britishers the Hos indulged into “silent rejection of alien rule” by violating official rules. Another trope of Ho social protest is regarded as “political mendicancy” wherein the bow-arrow-battleaxe was replaced by petition as their main arsenal (ibid.). But once subdued at the hands of the Britishers, many social and economic attributes of the Ho society in contravention of the adivasi imagery came to the light. The settlement records since the mid-19th century prepared by the colonisers to understand the socio-economic and political profile of the villagers approves of a society marked with early signs of corruption. Many outsiders were allowed by the village munda to settle on the common land, sometimes after paying a bribe. Peasantry was the major source of livelihood with due presence of artisans belonging to other ethnic groups like Kumhars, tantis, Gopes etc. Thus, the Hos were not a geographically secluded closed society.

Also, due to the beginning of the mining activities since the early 20th century in the resource-rich district of West Singhbhum, the Hos were exposed to interaction

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40 Munda is a customary village head in a Ho adivasi society. Though existing prior to the Wilkinson rule accruing sanction to the customary institutions in 1837, most of their powers and duties were defined by this law. Usually hereditary, sometimes people from outside family are also nominated by the District Collector to the post.

41 Asoka Kumar Sen (2012b) has regarded this practice by the Mundas as a silent protest against the official policy framed under Thomson’s rule of 1900 which denied the settling of dikus (outsiders) in Kolhan. This same practice can also be interpreted as a move towards considering the functional utility of the outsiders.
with outsiders. Thus, there existed a “tribal urban continuum”\(^{42}\). With a separate script of *warang chiti* and *Ho* language, the identity was now defined in terms of language. Undoubtedly, *Ho* language plays a major role in sustaining the ethnic identity of the people. But their acceptance of Hindi as a *lingua franca* indicates their curbed apathy towards ethnic others and entry into an economy where they depend upon others for sustenance. Though it can be accepted that the *Ho* society remained more or less egalitarian during the agrarian mode of production, it is difficult to accept the same social attributes as their interaction with other modes of production increased. A visible divide has occurred along class lines due to absorption of the *Hos* in the market economy, political mainstream, statist institutions etc. The political elites from the district are assertive in the State politics, engaged in white collar jobs like doctors, engineers, and high executive posts. However, one can find a hint of huge inequality within the community because of a majority of people engaged in highly exploitative and unskilled jobs. Ethnicity, therefore, served as an important tool of political self-determination but has not succeeded in addressing the social and economic concerns of the people. Moreover, it has been used by the indigenous elite as a “less evocative and deceivingly neutral term…to reformulate discourses legitimating social inequality” (Devalle, 1992:31). This situation entails an enquiry of ethnic assertion and power politics in the present context by applying the approach of Political anthropology.

Anthropology as an academic discipline is well suited to the task of paying “attention to the workings of apparently different versions of the political in places with different histories, and apparently different visions of justice and order” (Spencer, 2007:2). However, the political institutions of such societies become a subject matter of Political anthropology\(^{43}\). Though gaining ground with works of Sir Henry Maine and Louis Henry Morgan during the second part of the 19\(^{th}\) century, modern political anthropology as an approach of enquiry was established by Meyer Fortes, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Max Gluckman and others during the 1940s (Lewellen, 2002). Political anthropology, however, suffered setback during the 1980s because of the attempts by scholars like Theda Skocpol to draw clear lines between the state and

\(^{42}\) Verrier Elwin (1962:12) uses this term to identify the age old association of tribals with industrialisation and its consequences.

society (Fuller and Harriss, 2001:3). The approach reached a level of futility to draw accusation from David Easton for being unable to “mark off the political system from other subsystems of society”. Nevertheless, taking a dig at this accusation Lewellen argued that,

In the societies in which anthropologists have traditionally worked, politics cannot be analytically isolated from kinship, religion, age-grade associations, or secret societies, because these are precisely the institutions through which power and authority are manifested; in many societies and in political subgroupings within larger societies, “government” either does not exist or is irrelevant at the local level”. (Lewellen, 2003:xi)

Political anthropology in its modern form takes up the task of analysing politics as embedded in the apparently non-political institutions, ideologies and practices. Moreover, with the postmodern emphasis on subtle forms of power, political anthropology has expanded its horizon to consider power in all its forms. The adivasi elites asserting power in the name of Ho ethnicity have succeeded in sustaining the customary institutions of Manki-munda in West Singhbhum. However, its existence itself is not equally preferred by the entire Ho society with serious contestations coming to light in the wake of the panchayat elections conducted in 2010. Thus, in the present context the approach of Political anthropology will help in the deconstruction of power in Ho society by analysing the customary institutions vis-à-vis democratic institutions. Using this approach we will explore the local level politics and its consequences on development in the succeeding two sections.

4.4. Issues of politics and power assertion in a village society

Ever since JPRA was passed in 2001, it provoked protests from different sections objecting to one or the other provisions. Apart from protests in socio-political domain the organisations resorted to ‘jury politics’ challenging the JPRA on legal grounds. The government amended the Act several times (in 2003, 2005 & 2010) to surmount the legal challenge and social discontent. But still the government is entangled in legal dispute with the JPRA being sub-judice. Adivasi leaders have challenged the Act mainly on the ground of its incongruence with Panchayat

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44 A method used by the protestors wherein they resort to filing a complaint with the judiciary contesting the legality of the introduced provisions.
(Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA)\(^{45}\), 1996. With reference to West Singhbhum, the JPRA has several limitations. The district is recognised as a scheduled area and the customary institution existing here is known as \textit{Manki-Munda} system. It is a pre-British formation and evolved indigenously according to socio-political needs of the \textit{Ho} society. Later during the colonial era, the British brought major changes in the nature, structure and function of the \textit{manki-munda} system by corroborating their mode of administration with the customs of the tribals (Sen 2011: 10; 2012). This aim was achieved through the Wilkinson Rule of 1837.

In post-independence India also the customary institutions were retained through recognising colonial laws like Wilkinson Rule, 1837 and Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA), 1908. But constitution of statutory panchayats is also not something new to the scheduled areas of Jharkhand. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 1948 gram panchayats had been established on a statutory basis in Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas (Troisi 1978: 152). But as the adivasis were alien to elections, their participation in the panchayat elections was minimal (Troisi 1978: 155). As a result, in most of the gram panchayats in Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas the \textit{Mukhias} and the \textit{Sarpanchs} were non-tribals. There were also leadership conflicts between the adivasis and non-adivasis and discontent among the customary adivasi leaders. Troisi says that, 

\begin{quote}
\ldots the traditional councils were considered as a means of fostering group consciousness, the new government institutions are looked upon as a force that is disintegrating the tribal village solidarity. (Troisi 1978:154)
\end{quote}

While the discontent against panchayat elections dates back to the earlier period, a new political landscape where the adivasis are more assertive than earlier provides them a better opportunity to express their identity and culture. However, this assertion under the changed political circumstances seems even more to be a ploy on the part of the adivasi elite to frame a political imagination in the name of custom.

Presently, \textit{hukuk-nama} or ‘formal record of rights’ is issued by the district administration ‘appointing’ the village \textit{munda/manki} to collect revenue, to act as

\footnote{PESA talks about the retaining of customary self-governing institutions and mandates the bestowing upon of several powers on gram sabha, e.g. decision on land alienation, management of minor forest produce, minor mining leases, maintenance of water bodies and so on.}
police head for his village and maintain law and order. However, their role has diluted substantially due to the introduction of police and judicial system since independence (Sundar 2005: 4431). Nevertheless, government’s attempt to conduct panchayat elections according to JPRA met with protests in West Singhbhum. Due to its reservation policy, the non-tribals in Scheduled areas were not granted any seat in the Panchayat Samiti (PS) and Zila Parishad (ZP). As a result, non-advasis organisations like Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti and the Jharkhand Pradesh Panchayatiraj Adhikar Manch (JPPAM) deriving support from OBCs (mainly Kurmi-Mahato) argued that reserving the chair’s seat for adivasis in scheduled areas violates their own citizenship rights. They demanded to deschedule certain areas where they claim adivasis are in minority (Sundar 2005: 4430). Finally, an amendment was brought in JPRA on 10th October 2003 to de-reserve the posts of up-mukhiya in the Panchayat Samiti and Vice-Chairperson at the Zila Parishad.

Adivasi organisations avowed to the preservation of the customary institutions also staged wide-spread agitations. They wanted the JPRA to be brought in conformity with the PESA and favoured the retaining of customary system of governance. A wide range of organisations with varying ideologies were behind these protests. Gram Ganrhaiya Parishad wanted a constitutional status for the customary institutions in accordance with their role in history. Kolhan Raksha Sangh, a radical political outfit, has filed a case in the Supreme Court questioning the validity of Panchayat elections of 2010 and the JPRA. Manki-munda Sangh, an organisation of customary leaders, has also contested the JPRA through social mobilisation on various occasions.

Nevertheless, the protests against the JPRA as well as the panchayat elections were not united and the differences became visible during the panchayat elections of 2010. Division within the ranks of the customary leaders was observed as many of them fielded their family members to contest the panchayat elections. While this was done by those mundas who didn’t oppose the panchayat elections, even the munda who were active members of the Manki-munda Sangh hesitated to report this fissure among their own ranks to the Sangh because the two were found to be relatives. Xaxa (2005) who looks at identity formation for the tribals in the recent times, argues that the purpose of activism is gaining political autonomy and ensuring the protection and
development of tribal language, customs and culture. Though activism targeted towards these goals is appreciated, the problem occurs when the community curbs any debate on retaining or abolishing the different customary practices in the wake of transformed social consciousness. For instance, absence of property and political rights for Ho women in the customary laws can be considered as regressive provisions. However, it is difficult to challenge it from inside.

Recently, scholars have argued that the assertion in tribal politics is ‘reinforcing stereotypes about tribes, thereby shifting the focus from crucial issues relating to governance and natural resources to identity and ethnicity’ (Hebbar 2011: 5). This observation is quite valid as several regional political parties in Jharkhand take up the issue of displacement and land alienation under the pretext of tribal culture and identity whereas more urgent issues like livelihood remains unaddressed. It rather gives chance to the tribal elite to assert their social presence through citing custom and culture even if they have little or no relevance at all. For example, the customary institution of *manki* is not as popular as that of *munda* and people rarely care about their existence (Sundar 2005: 4431). However, the *mankis* also corroborated their interests with those of *munda* and argued for retaining the customary institutions. More than the functionality of an institution what is embarked upon is the legitimacy which is grounded in the history of the region. Although the protesting *mankis* don’t have the popular support, they are relying upon those organisations which give priority to the identity and culture rather than strategic negotiation of essential needs.

The traditional system of governance has not lost its importance completely but has substantially lost its ground due to the anomalies which have crept into their functioning. However, people do not get annoyed with the customary institutions only because of their corruption or other malpractices. To mention, prohibition was noticeably a major agenda in the community meetings of the customary heads. But because the *Ho* people regard the consumption of *diyang* as a cultural practice, they disregard such views of the customary leaders. In addition to this the provident nature of the tribals is a misconception. As stated earlier, the adivasis also aspire to

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46 Home-made liquor prepared by fermentation of rice. Drinking of *diyang* has cultural value as the drink is supposedly offered for propitiating the souls of ancestors.

47 Even though the people shied away from criticising the customary leaders for propagating such ideas, a majority of the villagers took an excuse for their drinking habit by attributing cultural norms to the consumption of *diyang*. 
have a lifestyle like the ‘mainstream’ people and engage with cultural practices according to their changed socio-economic circumstances. Adivasis living in urban dwellings have almost given up participation in the annual festival called maghe parab48. Apart from alienating the urbaners from their rural counterparts such lifestyle also challenges the ideological apparatus of their own elites. And, whenever the conservativeness of the customary institutions curtail their aspirations they seek redemption in modern day institutions like courts, police etc. Moreover, not all adivasis are indifferent towards the wealth garnered by their political custodians and strive to become like them either by aligning or contesting them. The difference within the adivasi society of Jharkhand has been brought out well by Uday Chandra who argues that,

The adivasi community is thus not a vestige of the pristine pre-colonial past, but an artifact of the modern constitution of state and society in India with its peculiar set of intergenerational conflicts that define the nature and limits of governmentality. (Chandra 2013: 58)

Ethnicity, however, is not only used by the politicians to nurture their ambitions in the name of identity. It has also spilled over to garner support among the members in cases of assault upon their livelihood resources. But considering this notion of identity as axiomatic in the light of fragmented nature of the society will make the articulation of protest susceptible to simple manipulations by the adversaries. In the next section, we will analyse the evidences from the field to substantiate the existing power relations and characteristics symbolic of a notably divided society. Conducting this enquiry in the aftermath of the panchayat elections helps in revealing the social and political fissures otherwise lying hidden. Underlying this enquiry is the assumption that, operationalisation of local governance in the present form has further provoked ‘politicisation of tradition’ (Beall,2006:9) apart from perpetuating under-development.

4.5. Evaluating Custom and Democracy: Experiences from the Field

The lack of people’s knowledge about manki speaks a lot about whether the people really strive to retain their customary institutions or they are simply mindful of

48 It is celebrated between the month of January and February on the occasion of annual crop harvesting. The Ho adivasi also celebrate Ba festival after the blossoming of sal flowers; cattle are worshiped in goma festival and jomnama festival before the eating of ripened crop.
the institution playing a role in their daily life. However, under-development in the region is testimony to the inefficiency of not only the customary institution of manki-munda but the entire political discourse claiming to be representative of adivasis. Shrinking presence of customary institutions from the public space can be discerned from the fact that rarely was the gram sabha (GS) meeting held in most of the villages even for deciding upon the local developmental issues. According to the claim made by some of the villagers as well as the munda, they seemed to be alienated with the meetings because none of the projects approved through the gram sabha were implemented. It was also noticed that the munda who were politically more aware and literate took more interest in conducting the GS meetings.

Throughout the FGDs widespread dissatisfaction could be observed among the people over the role of their village munda. Most of the time, the mundas were found to be unaware of the roles and responsibilities allotted to them through JPRA. They conceded to the ways of mukhia and panchayat sevak and easily sanctioned their wish. Regarding the social audit, the munda of Katikuda village said that the panchayat representatives asked for his signature and he simply complied. However, the villagers claimed that the munda was bribed by the panchayat functionaries for signing any document. A sense of regret prevailed amongst the villagers for the munda was not even an elected representative. From this fact, it can be discerned that people want control over their own fate and, therefore, welcomed and participated in large numbers in the panchayat elections despite voracious protests from a section.

However, it will be wrong to entirely blame the munda for the absence of gram sabha meetings. Most of the villagers also never attended any GS meeting and remained occupied with daily chores. GS roles were maintained in a cumbersome manner and sometimes the attendance register was taken to individual household for taking signature of the members. Even the organisations which claimed to raise people’s awareness about the customary institutions were found to be providing only lip service and did not indulge into proper training of the customary leaders. During one of the discussions, the office bearers of the Gram Ganhrajya Parishad were accused of not divulging the information related to the welfare and governance of the population.

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49 Mukhia is the Chairman of the Panchayat and heads the meeting for annul budgeting and expenditure under a panchayat area whereas panchayat sevak is a government appointed official who assists mukhia in carrying on his assigned role.
people. This may be due to the incompatibility between the wish of the people and the objective of the organisation itself. While the former are more concerned about the welfare schemes and livelihood measures the latter has its role embedded in the ideology of preserving customary institutions.

Amidst the growing criticism of the customary institutions for indulging in heinous activities like honour killing and caste discriminations, Krishna and Ananthpur (2009) have cautioned against castigating these institutions and advocate an informed public discussion. Citing the example of judicial system in India, they have established the salience of customary village councils (CVCs) for speedy and less expansive justice. Not necessarily based on formal law, these CVCs

…implement a more quotidian justice, a version of right and wrong grounded in everyday practices and taken-for-granted beliefs. (Ananthpur and Krishna, 2009)

Likewise, in West Singhbhum the customary institutions are quite effective in conflict resolution because the customary leaders were more aware of social conditions and ensure expeditious justice with fewer expenses. However, this aspect of customary institutions is also not without a taint and their dubious role is discussed ahead. The village munda is endowed with the power to hold meetings and resolve the civil cases at the village meetings. However, in matter of serious crimes the cases go to the police. Although most of the smaller cases were resolved at the village level, there were instances where civil cases were also taken to the police. An incident questioning the reliability attached with the customary institution of munda occurred in Kondua village. Munda’s influential position in the village made it possible to impose harsh punishment, even though it was not within the ambit of his authority. In yet another case, the village munda accused the manki of indulging into graft. These incidents reduce the reliability of the customary institutions in the eyes of the people. The customary institutions now enjoy reduced legitimacy because of such incidents

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50 A boy charged with molesting a girl from munda’s family was fined heavily (around Rs. 30,000) and the boy’s family was even asked to arrange for a social feast following tradition.

51 In Simbia village, the munda punished a girl and her family for beating up a woman. The accused girl denied complying with the punishment and, hence, a social boycott was imposed against the family. After a few days teen mankis came to resolve the issue. On this the munda said that he had not recommended the case to the customary teen manki then why did they take up the case suo moto. Later it was found that the accused had bribed the manki to appear in her favour.
but are, nevertheless, playing a vital role in maintaining the social cohesion through some ritualistic practices.

The *munda* plays an active role in organising festivals at village level and conduct meetings to decide upon the amount of contribution to be made by each household. Apart from this, *mundas* in several villages were actively taking part in encouraging the villagers for contributing voluntary labour towards construction of some damaged village roads, repairing ponds and tanks, etc. The *munda* in Kokarkatta village has created *Jungle Raksha Vahini* to protect the forest as well as pursue afforestation. However, while carrying on this role the *munda* also allowed the trees to be felled “illegally” due to his concern towards the villagers who rely exclusively upon its sale. Thus, in contravention of the law, the *munda* serves a livelihood necessity. A study conducted on *Joint Forest Management* (JFM) has highlighted the issue of ‘elite capture’ (Kumar, 2004) in Jharkhand. But the preceding example indicates towards a flip side of this project which though illegal has a moral value within the local economy. Despite all these mixed experiences with the customary institutions people voted heavily in the panchayat elections.

However, considering the huge (69 per cent) turn-out in the panchayat elections of West Singhbum as a moral defeat of the protesters will be a simple reading of a complex phenomenon and different socio-political aspects need to be studied closely. The explanation provided by the *munda* and the people sympathetic to him for the huge voter turn-out in panchayat elections was that people were lured into voting as the contestants arranged for *diyang*\(^2\) and chicken. Another version was that a lot of bogus voting had taken place. This situation brings us to the question that, Was the high voter turn-out in panchayat elections a sign of people’s disgruntlement with the customary leaders? Or, were they able to exactly comprehend the value of the PRIs in rescuing them from their deplorable situation? Apart from few places, the people didn’t rear grievances against the customary leaders as no social agitation was noticed in the area. In answer to the latter question, it can be argued that the people had not voted due to their realisation that PRIs will cater to their developmental needs. The entire landscape preceding the panchayat election was politicised due to the agitation by the *Manki-munda Sangh* and no developmental issue dominated.

\(^{52}\) A traditional alcoholic drink made by fermenting rice. Earlier used by the adivasis to propitiate the soul of ancestors and drink occasionally. But now days it is used as cheap liquor on daily basis.
Moreover, the panchayat elections opened the prospect for many people, otherwise subdued by the *mundas*, to become a part of ‘decentralised’ corrupt practices.

After the elections, on several occasions, the *munda* contested the legitimacy of the *mukhia* on the social terrain. Whereas power equations and animosity could have existed earlier between the faction supporting the *munda* and the *mukhia*, the panchayat elections provided it the required opportunity to be contested openly. For sure, it may be claimed that the people were not motivated with developmental agenda during the panchayat elections. But what cannot be denied either is that a faction who contested the panchayat elections was covertly lobbying for the election. Usually, PESA is regarded as a progressive legislation due to its sensible provisioning of governance in context of tribal society and culture. However, it can be criticised for its conspicuous silence on the issue of women representation. This gap, nevertheless, is filled by the otherwise controversial Jharkhand Panchayat Raj Act (JPRA). As amended in 2010, Section 21 of the JPRA provides for 50 percent reservation of seats for women. This definitely is an improvement upon the customary practices and will go a long way in ensuring woman empowerment.

However, this initiative is also not without qualifiers and it was found that while some of the women representatives were active others had virtually passed on their role upon the male members, either their spouses or relatives. Interestingly, a trend emerged wherein the women mukhia who themselves looked into the affairs of the panchayat were claimed to be more honest than their counterparts who had surrendered their role to their relatives. Regarding the attitude of customary leaders towards women representatives it can be said that some of them are not only critical of the changing role of women but also goes to the extent of maligning their character.

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53 Representatives elected through panchayat elections from group of villages.
54 In one such case a person belonging to the below poverty line category went to the *mukhia* to claim the money (Rs.100) which he was entitled to receive in lieu of the expenses for preparing *Aadhar* (Unique ID) Card. The mukhia, however, knew that this person was loyal to the munda and denied him the money. On this there was a small scuffle after which the mukhia registered an FIR in the police station against that person. As the police require the munda’s permission to investigate such issues the munda assured the person that he will take care of the issue.
55 The mukhia of Dudhbila and Kondua Panchayat were not only perceived as honest but were also active in protest against land acquisition by the companies in their respective areas. However, the mukhia of Noangaon and Chhota Raikela were seen as puppets by the villagers while their brother-in-law acted as the virtual mukhia.
in front of an outsider\textsuperscript{56}. This attitude can be regarded as intolerance of the customary leaders towards women of their own community when it comes to distribution of political power. Thus, a positive contribution of the panchayat elections is ensuring an opportunity for the women to assert their equality in a society which is marked by its institutionalised discrimination towards them. The Ho women are not given the land rights and they cannot become a village \textit{manda}, except in some cases (Sen 2011). Their participation in the GS is very meager and they hardly hold an opinion on any social, political or economic issue.

Despite its positive impact on women empowerment, the PRIs in West Singhbhum are largely considered to be corrupt. Many irregularities were reported starting from the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) to even repair of tube wells. In case of \textit{Indira Awas Yojana}\textsuperscript{57}, the \textit{manda} recommends the beneficiary from among the BPL families in a GS conducted for this purpose. However, a list is prepared by the block officials and then the exact beneficiary is ear-marked. People claimed that those who got the benefits had to pay bribes to the \textit{mukhia}, \textit{panchayat sevak} and the Block Development Officer. It was claimed by the beneficiaries from several villages that the \textit{mukhia} had demanded bribe to allocate the benefits. In addition to this, it was also noticed that many well-to-do families got the benefits of \textit{Indira Awas Yojana}. While such practices highlight the prevailing corruption among the panchayat functionaries, approval of schemes in favour of socially powerful people help them to win over the social sanction.

Another issue of irregularity was noticed in spending of funds allocated for repair of tube wells and cleaning of wells and ponds. In almost all the villages, people claimed that they had to do these works by voluntarily collecting money among themselves and none of the tube pumps were repaired by the \textit{mukhia}. The villagers also claimed that with the arrival of summer most of the tube wells become dry. This was due to the reason that, while drilling bore wells the contractors are asked to dig up to certain level. However, the contractors stop digging as soon as they found water

\textsuperscript{56} The munda of Karkatta made some lewd comments about the mukhia’s character. He said that many male are liberal towards the mukhia as she is still unmarried and looks beautiful. This talks a lot about the feudal and patriarchal mentality of the munda.

\textsuperscript{57} This is a housing scheme run by the Indian government targeting the poor people in rural areas.
and fix the tube well. Although it works well during other seasons it stops working during the summer once the water level drops. The contractors, thus, become a part of “decentralised corruption” and indulge into small acts of corruption at the cost of people’s needs.

To carve out their space of comfort out of the bureaucratic corruption, sometimes the villagers had to resort to subtle but pre-mediated techniques which saved them from open confrontation. Though not exactly similar to the subtle methods of protest called “weapons by the weak”, the subsequent example will describe the method applied by the poor to engage successfully with the bureaucratic might. The scheme of Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification approves the supply of free electricity to every below poverty line (BPL) household. However, due to some anomaly in the BPL list prepared for Kotgarh village many households did not qualify to receive the intended benefit. But the engineer in the electricity department asked the villagers to pay Rs.1200 per household and assured them of electricity supply. The villagers collected money among themselves and paid a part of the entire amount to the engineer. Electricity was supplied in the village although the entire amount of bribe was not paid. However, when the engineer insisted for the balance payment, the person who collected the bribe declined citing unwillingness of people to spare any further money. Lastly, the engineer had to compromise with that amount and the electricity was provided. Thus, the villagers succeeded in ensuring their entitlement by engaging strategically with the engineer.

However, when it comes to negotiating the corruption of their own representatives the villagers are rarely left with any option. For example, after the panchayat elections the mukhia and panchayat sevak are the overseeing authority for MGNREGS projects and they also get both Central as well as State funds under Backward Region Grants Fund (BRGF). Although most of the villagers were eligible under the job guarantee scheme of MGNREG, majority of them couldn’t get work despite having the job cards. Regarding the job card it was said that once the villagers completed working on the project, the contractor use to take away their job card with him. Afterwards, false entry is made on the cards and misused by the panchayat sevak. The munda also is not aware of the benefits granted under the MGNREGS and do not inform the villagers about the unemployment benefits if one does not get the
job for the days guaranteed under the scheme. Thus, introduction of developmental measures have failed to percolate to the people due to corruption and lack of awareness. Neither the customary institutions nor the PRIs have succeeded in providing relief to the people suffering under simmering poverty.

4.6. Summary

Ethnicity has served as a significant factor in organising the masses to achieve political goals. However, its use as a weapon by ambitious politicians to serve their own interest cannot be denied either. In fact, Jharkhand emerges to be a valid case to endorse this hypothesis where the adivasi ethnicity has been asserted by the adivasi elites to gain statehood as well as remain in power. But the poor development indicators of the majority of the adivasi reveal the story of betrayal of the people by their own political custodians. The present chapter engaged with the interrogation of a hitherto egalitarian notion of an adivasi society. This exercise is required to refute the axiomatic and official acceptance of tribe as a construct which is presumably stagnant and has hardly moved despite the changes pervading tribal society. While the (mis)use of the identity in electoral politics has ill-served the people, it has nurtured a tendency among the people to frame protest movements which is often wanting in its encounter with the adversaries.

As the present chapter intends to set the tone for further analysis of the politics of dispossession, the issue of under-development in West Singhbhum has been analysed through the prism of a situation which evolved before and after the panchayat elections. Marked with the presence of customary institutions the village society has become a contesting ground for both the customary leaders, i.e. manki-munda and the panchayat representatives. The field experiences have revealed a mixed reaction towards the legitimacy and support which both the institutions enjoy. However, neither of the institutions succeeded in alleviating the poverty and addressing the under-development prevailing in the area. In fact, conducting of panchayat elections has only further divided the social domain and makes the chances of unified protest dim in case of assault upon the traditional resources of the people. This analysis provides a mute response to the question that, has the state in Jharkhand acted in favour of the capitalists and devoured the socio-political ambience of the adivasi dominated society? Or, has it just made the social divisiveness explicit?
Whatever may be the intentions of the panchayat elections imposed by the government on the people of scheduled area, its consequences certainly reverberates in the discourse of land alienation. In the next chapter, we will engage with the exercise of revealing the forces assisting land acquisition and the role they play in attributing a certain characteristic to the entire process. With the aim of appropriating the local mechanisms active in the politics of dispossession, the next chapter will attempt to explore the situation from the perspective of the “dispossessed”.