Abstract

Kalahandi has been discussed as a case of absolute deprivation amidst relative plenty, and the reason for this has often been identified as the lack of proper developmental action by the state. Amongst governmental developmental interventions, water-related interventions, especially those related to watershed development, assume salience because of the framing of Kalahandi as a land of drought. To understand emergent forms of governmental action in the field of watershed development in Kalahandi, doctoral fieldwork was undertaken in the project site of Western Orissa Rural Livelihoods Project (WORLP), a governmental, participatory watershed development project that was being implemented in Kalahandi. Doctoral fieldwork was undertaken in the period between June 2008 and February 2010 using ethnographic methods such as in-depth unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, observation and participant observation along with collection of secondary material.

The study identifies the mission mode of doing government as a key change that happened during the last 25 years involving an increased importance of ‘social’ technologies. The study describes five governmental tactics related to emergent modes of governmental action; it also identifies an increasing convergence in the everyday practices of governmental and non-governmental organisations, and the growth of ‘the social’ as a terrain and object of governmental action as two important effects of the deployment of these tactics.

The study identifies toutary as a key social domain that frames the perceptions and actions of people related to the state. As a domain toutary is populated by social agents, called touters; toutary can be defined as the interstitial zone between state and society created by the increasing penetration by the state through social technologies. This study provides a critique of a dominant strand of theorising the state in India involving borrowings of Gramscian notions of passive revolution into the Indian context and its recent extension through the political society formulation to understand the postcolonial state in India. It shows the advantages of an ethnographic approach towards studying the everyday state in India, and tries to briefly discuss implications of such an understanding of the state for ‘underdeveloped’ districts such as Kalahandi.
Preface

I am from the district of Cuttack in coastal Odisha, and grew up mostly in the city of Bhubaneswar in the same region. Kalahandi lies some twelve hours away from these places by bus. But I have a family connection with the district. I have two younger sisters. One was born in Bhawanipatna, the headquarters of Kalahandi. Our father had a transferable job in the then Electricity Board of the Government of Odisha. One of his postings in the peripatetic life that he, and we led, was in Bhawanipatna between 1981 and 1983. I was really young when he was posted there. I do not have any recollections of the district from that time. But my father and mother have fond memories of their stay there that extended for almost two years. They remember the lovable ferocity of the monsoons, and the green walls of trees that used to stand at odd angles to the roads of the district. The smells of its myriad local varieties of rice, and the texture of desi chicken that was available really cheap there in the early 1980s still haunt them. More than anything else, they remember the startling openness of the local population towards outsiders, the easy familiarity across social groups, the vernacular cosmopolitanism of a small town like Bhawanipatna that has migrants from Bihar and Calcutta (amongst many other places), the intensity of the festivities of the Chhatar Jātrā of goddess Mānikeswari, and the longing that the district evokes long after one has left it.

But Kalahandi is the Somalia of India. Starting from the mid-1980s the district has become a source of continuous reportage surrounding drought and hunger, especially in the English language national press in India. But the district’s social reality is complex. The district has a reputation of being overwhelmingly tribal. 29 percent of the district’s population comprises of Scheduled Tribes. In comparison, Odisha’s tribal population stands at 22 percent of the total. Kalahandi does have a substantial tribal population. But in terms of proportion, it is not substantially larger than that of Odisha. Only Thuamul Rampur and Lanjigarh blocks of the district are listed as scheduled areas under the Fifth Schedule of the constitution of India. But by popular perception and self-assertion by the tribal group of Kondhs, Kalahandi is seen as being a land of the Kondhs, and Kondhs as being the original inhabitants of the district. In fact, despite the immigration of a larger number of social groups from neighbouring regions, Kondhs still consist of around 13 percent of the district’s population.

A large part of the district comprises of valleys of rivers such as Tel, Udanti and Utei. Important rivers such as Indravati originate in the hills of the district. Parts of the district occupy the north eastern portions of the Eastern Ghat mountain ranges of India and are heavily forested. But significant parts of the district, especially in the Dharamgarh sub-division consists of extensive plains, now irrigated with water from the Upper Indravati Project on River Indravati.

The district is an erstwhile princely state that was ruled by the Nāga dynasty more or less continuously for over one thousand years till the integration of the state into the republic of India in 1948. It is one of the very few small kingdoms in Odisha to have a history of continuous rule by a single dynasty. At various points of time it was a feudatory state to various regional and national empires and political formations such as
those of the Eastern Gangas, the Suryavamsi Gajapatis, the Marathas and the British. Although the self-perception of the district is that of a peaceful and peace-loving one, the history, at least its recent history related to British colonialism, is quite bloody, with the 1882 rebellion of the Kondhs being one of the most violent in Odisha’s history.

Reportedly, this rebellion took place because of a governmental initiative to ‘improve’ the kingdom’s agriculture and economy by settling Kulthas, a peasant caste in tribal areas. This intervention, the response to it by the administration, and its subsequent framings, have provided continuing tropes for looking at Kalahandi’s social reality. Stories about statist interventions, their types and efficacies, have shaped Kalahandi as a set of narratives. Even when governmental actions and interventions are supposed to saturate the descriptions of social processes in Kalahandi, what we do not have good accounts of are the changes in the forms of governmental actions, and the ways in which people perceive and act with respect to these actions. Descriptions surrounding the state and politics in Kalahandi and in India tend to give accounts of state formation in which the story of the state is, more often than not, the story of class coalitions and dynamics and/or processes of claim-making on the state by communities.

This thesis is an attempt at providing an alternative account regarding the state in India. It tries to shift the frame of discussions from politics to state, and tries to narrate processes of, what it terms as state-fabrication (instead of state-formation) by taking a self-consciously poststructuralist turn. The sectoral context is that of watershed development, and the methodological vantage point for the work is that of multi-sited ethnography. The thesis identifies what it terms as the period of the long 1980s (1977-91) as a significant period of shift in which the modes of state-fabrication changed substantially in India. It then goes on to describe an emergent mode of state-fabrication that seems to dominantly frame governmental actions and people’s perceptions of the state – the mission mode. It also provides descriptions of tactics deployed under this mode. It identifies a vernacular social domain – that of toutary, at the intersections of state and society in Kalahandi. It argues that such a domain provides better accounts of processes of state-society interactions in Kalahandi than recent formulations such as political society. Thus, these various strands of arguments offered by the thesis provide a counter-narrative and build a counter-case against a dominant theoretical position that tries to account for state and politics in India. The thesis identifies this dominant position as the passive revolution formulation and its political society extension. It argues that such formulations do not account for processes of state-fabrication in Kalahandi adequately.

Instead of providing a theory to dominant strands of theorising, this thesis tries to provide an alternative by providing a new conceptual vocabulary consisting of such terms as modes of state-fabrication and regimes of state-fabrication that can form the basis of further theorising. The possibilities of generalization offered by the thesis are therefore at the level of concepts and not at the level of specific processes. Thus, this thesis as much, holds the promise of many journeys as it is the end of the doctoral one.