Chapter III
Framing Kalahandi as an iconic backward district

I. Kalahandi: an introduction

As discussed in Chapter II, an aspect of the changes taking place in the long 1980s and the attendant processes of state-fabrication, was the framing of certain districts as backward, and therefore suitable for intensive developmental interventions. One of such districts that have been under-studied is Kalahandi. It is perceived to be one of the most backward districts in India. It forms a part of a broader region in the South West part of Odisha called the KBK (taking the initials of the undivided districts of Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput) region that is characterised by widespread poverty, lack of health and other public services, and low levels of attainments in terms of socio-economic indicators (Dash 2007). The district occupies the southwestern portion of Odisha\textsuperscript{11}, bordered to the north by the districts of Balangir and Nuapada, to the south by the districts of Rayagada and Koraput, to the south-west by Nabarangpur, to the west by the districts of Nabarangpur in Odisha and Raipur in Chhatisgarh, and to the east by the districts of Rayagada and Kandhamal in Odisha.

Tribal groups comprise a major proportion of the district’s population with their share at around 28.65 percent of the total. The other numerically significant demographic group, the Scheduled Castes comprise 17.67 percent of the population (Banik 2008). The area of the district is 7, 920 square kilometres, and it has a population of 1, 573,054 according to the 2011 Census of India\textsuperscript{12} (Sethi 2011). The present district of Kalahandi was an eponymous princely state. The district was earlier known as Mahakantara (Great Forest) in ancient India. It was also known as Kamala Mandala, which can be translated as lotus or prosperous region. The district is primarily agricultural and industry is very limited, but bauxite and graphite deposits have been commercially exploited (Pati 1999).

\textsuperscript{11} For location of the district of Kalahandi in the state of Odisha please refer to Appendix 1.
\textsuperscript{12} For a detailed demographic profile of the district of Kalahandi please refer to Appendix 2.
Since the mid-1980s, Kalahandi has hit the headlines in newspapers regularly for the repeated drought situation and for reported starvation deaths and child sale. This has led to it becoming a favorite site for development projects including the famous KBK project initiated by the government of India in 1994. There has been a significant and increasing presence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the district (Nayak 2002). But, despite such interventions and programmes, the condition in Kalahandi continues to be one of deprivation and distress.

This has to be contrasted with facts such as these: 1) the average annual rainfall in Kalahandi is higher than the national average; 2) the per capita production of food grains in the district has generally been higher than the Indian average for most of the years for which data is available; 3) Kalahandi is a net exporter of food grains; 4) Kalahandi is one of the major contributors of rice to the Food Corporation of India (FCI) in Odisha. As these facts show, the socio-economic deprivation in Kalahandi has been ‘naturalised’ (Prasad 2001). The deprivation is portrayed as a result of its geography (lack of water) and the consequent droughts. This in turn ignores the political economic reasons for the continued marginalisation of the region and its people that has led to the framing of Kalahandi as needing development. There is an obvious contradiction between the framing of Kalahandi as drought-prone and being backward due to ‘natural’ reasons, and the realities of the district (Sainath 1996). The contradiction is glaring, and the persistence of the dominant discourse needs to be interrogated13.

Kalahandi is generally seen as a drought-prone district. This is perceived as resulting in resource degradation and the concomitant erosion of livelihood opportunities. Politics in the district is seen as focusing on the logistics of elections than tackling issues of deprivation. Many development programmes are seen as being launched without taking into account basic underlying causes of poverty and deprivation (Mohanty 1998). Livelihood programmes based on sustainable usage of local natural resources have been advocated as a developmental intervention that can meet the district’s needs (Pradhan 1993).

13 For data on some relevant development indicators of the district of Kalahandi please refer to Appendix 3.
Map of Kalahandi

Emergence of Kalahandi as a metaphor for hunger and destitution

Key to framings of Kalahandi as a land of drought, hunger and deprivation were reports that came out of the Greater Kalahandi region surrounding starvation deaths and distress sale of children in the mid-1980s. Amongst these stories, one of the biggest was that of Phanas Punji, a girl who was apparently sold by her sister-in-law Banita Punji for forty rupees because of distress. After the news broke in the national media, Rajiv Gandhi, the then prime minister, visited the district to have a firsthand experience of the situation.

14 Downloaded on 30.06.2011 at 20:54 hours from: http://www.worlp.com/kalahandi-Map.htm and then modified.
Most newspaper reports framed the stories of starvation deaths and ‘child sale’ in Kalahandi as events and not as outcomes of broad structural processes (Sainath 1996).

A report published in the Mumbai-based journal Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) in 1985, along with other reportage coming out in the national English language press at that time, brought Kalahandi to the public attention by framing the district as the most backward of Odisha’s thirteen districts. It went on to reinforce certain key tropes that have since then been consistently used to frame the district and the Greater Kalahandi region; for example, the droughts of the pre-independence period\(^{15}\) and the droughts in 1954–55, 1965–66, 1974–75 and finally in the year 1985. This report identified the problem in Kalahandi as unequal distribution of productive resources such as land, resource extraction by the state, especially through land revenue and the various forest cesses, and investments in non-productive assets such as TV stations. It also saw the neglect of traditional water harvesting structures and systems as a major reason for the inability of the district to cope with the recurrent bouts of drought. Further, the report argued that the work of both international and local philanthropic and socio-political organisations was not making any headway in addressing the district’s problems (Purohit et al 1985).

EPW continued to report and comment on Kalahandi during this period (EPW 1987a, 1987b). The year 1987 saw one of the biggest droughts in the history of postcolonial India that also affected this region. However, despite the drought and failure of monsoons, there were no deaths due to famine. Still there were widespread reports of deprivation and misery in the rural areas occasioned by the drought (EPW 1988). The newspaper reports covering the region over the last two and half decades or so have been consistently similar in their form and approach. They paint pictures of the district in a style reminiscent of the accounts of Africa in the international media. But this image has not been created by only journals and newspapers; many different sets of actors have been at work in the creation of such an image. The poem at the beginning of the next

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\(^{15}\) Reported in a district gazetteer published in 1980 that does not list its sources.
section points at the multiplicity of the narratives surrounding Kalahandi, a multiplicity that end up producing a somewhat singular effect.

**Narratives of Kalahandi**

*Kalahandi*¹⁶

*I was covered in a patchwork quilt of a sari inside the confines of my home.*

*The one who dragged me away and made me stand in the middle of the hāt*, who shoved his thick fingers in the eyes of the crowd of spectators, and declared my nakedness, *he was called a journalist; and now, he owns a two-storied building in the capital.*

*The one who searched dusty pages of thick tomes for the causes of my nakedness, who investigated the proportion of salt and sugar in my tears, was called a researcher; his waist size increased by a few inches on the fellowship of the University Grants Commission.*

*The one who cried pages and pages grieving over my nakedness, stitched words and made stanzas, was called a poet; he got applause, felicitations and awards in the auditoria of five-star hotels.*

*The one who growled that he would cut the hands of those who had disrobed me, who swore that he would, with his own fingers, weave me a beautiful sari was called a leader of men; he received the throne and the crown.*

*I, blinded and mute, still stand at the centre of this hāt, with hanging head wearing the same patchwork quilt of a sari.*

---Akhil Nayak (2008a: 38–39)¹⁸

This poem by Akhil Nayak is an indictment, but an insightful one. It captures the creation of a sustained image of Kalahandi that has involved many different kinds of actors such as academics, NGOs, governmental organisations, the media, and litterateurs. This literature is voluminous. The objective here is to examine some indicative texts that give

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¹⁶ This poem titled ‘Kalahandi’ in the original Odia was published in the volume *Dhik* by Akhil Nayak. Although the original poem is in free verse constituting six stanzas, it has been translated as an English prose poem with six paragraphs.

¹⁷ A temporary market primarily set up in rural areas and towns and generally weekly in its periodicity, although bi-weekly or tri-weekly markets are also not unknown.

¹⁸ Translated by Sailen Routray.
us a broad understanding as to the ways in which Kalahandi has been framed and reframed as a district.

**Academic narratives on Kalahandi**

Although Kalahandi has remained in the public eye for more than a couple of decades now, the total amount of social scientific work on Kalahandi (in terms of academic papers and books, and not MPhil/PhD theses) is relatively limited. The book *Democracy and the state: welfare, secularism and development in contemporary India* (Jayal 1999) was one of the first book-length academic texts in English that discussed Kalahandi. This book focused on the relationships between state, society and democracy in India in the 1980s by picking up three thematic concerns that have been central to the Indian national imaginary—welfare, secularism and development. Jayal maps out the emergence of Kalahandi as a site of welfare concerns of the state (at local, regional and national levels) and sees the persistence of hunger and starvation in the district as a result of the absence of structural socio-economic transformations and the absence of substantive democracy. But Jayal’s book did not focus specifically on Kalahandi.

In this section three books that discuss Kalahandi in some detail will be examined. These three are: *The politics of hunger in India: a study of democracy, governance and Kalahandi’s poverty* (2000) (henceforth *TPOHII*) by Bob Currie, *Hunger and famine in Kalahandi: an anthropological study* (2010) (henceforth *HAFIK*) by Arima Mishra, and *Starvation and India’s democracy* (2008) (henceforth *SAID*) by Dan Banik.

*TPOHII* was the first academic book to grapple exclusively with the issues of deprivation and hunger in Kalahandi. It locates the experience of poverty, deprivation, hunger and starvation in Kalahandi in the broader context of the historical experience of colonialism and the growth of the developmental state in India in this specific regional context. Located firmly in the discipline of political science, it posits the problem as one of failure of public action creating situations in which there are broadening gaps between public expectations and the delivery of governmental services in Kalahandi. This study
also identified some other key factors such as the difficulty in posting skilled public officials in a district such as Kalahandi. The problem, therefore, at least to some extent, was perceived to be the lack of state capacity (Currie 2000).

Based on fieldwork done in the Greater Kalahandi region, HAFIK posits hunger and starvation of Kalahandi within a broader academic literature on famine. It argues that famine should be understood as a process and maps out the history of this process by locating the current deterioration in the condition of cultivators and labourers and the patterns of distress migration within a broader framework of history of land and land tenure. But when famine and the state are discussed, only the representations of the state in the form of reports and codes are analysed. It does not deal with the ways in which the state actually functions in specific geographies and is perceived and experienced by the people (Mishra 2010).

Banik’s book (SAID) is an important addition to the scholarship on Kalahandi. This book brings a much-needed comparative dimension to discussions surrounding Kalahandi—it compares poverty and starvation issues in the district to those prevalent in Purulia (a district with similar demographic composition in West Bengal, another state in Eastern India). He refines Sen’s approach to famine and extends it to incorporate the case of Kalahandi. He reads unequal agricultural land holdings, the history of backwardness, improperly targeted social security and anti-poverty programmes, lack of proper healthcare facilities and over-dependence on agriculture as characterising poverty in Kalahandi, leading to the vulnerabilities that result in starvation deaths. He discusses in detail the failures of governmental action, especially of programmes such as the public distribution system, the Integrated Childhood Development Services (ICDS) and the National Mid-day Meals Programme (NMMP). He also discusses the legal interventions, interventions by the press and parliamentary activism surrounding poverty and starvation in Kalahandi, and the inability of such interventions and initiatives to prevent starvation deaths in the district. Banik blames an

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19 Although it must be noted at this point that this comparative dimension is limited, and out of ten chapters in SAID only one chapter focuses on Purulia.
unmotivated bureaucracy and non-operational administrative procedures, lack of credibility of the news reports, weak panchayats, lack of effective judiciary, and poverty in thinking in terms of public policy across party lines as being responsible for the situation in Kalahandi. As opposed to Kalahandi, Banik posits that a stable administration and empowered and active panchayats have been able to prevent widespread starvation deaths in Purulia. Thus, even Banik formulates the reasons for the continuing deprivation in Kalahandi as due to state failure; albeit, the failure here is a characteristic of the local/regional state and not that of ‘the Indian state’ (Banik 2008).

As this brief survey of some key academic tracts on the district shows, there seems to be some consensus surrounding the problem in Kalahandi. The problem is seen as structural, and as having to do with inherently unequal relationships of various social groups with productive forces, especially those related to land. The poverty and destitution in the region is also seen as a result of state failure and a failure of public action, especially that of the local and the regional state.

**Narratives on Kalahandi from the print media**

The above observations are also true of the narratives produced by media organisations such as newspapers. English language newspapers in particular played an important role in the emergence of Kalahandi as a trope for destitution in India because of their national reach although often stories were broken first by Odia newspapers. English newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* and periodicals such as *Sunday* and *Illustrated Weekly of India* played an important role in this process (Jayal 1999; Currie 2000; Banik 2008).

But the journalistic narratives that dominantly seem to frame the district are two collections of reportage; the first one is *Everyone loves a good drought* by P. Sainath (1996) and *Diary saga saga* by Tejinder that was published in Hindi by Rajkamal Prakashan in 2004. The importance of these two books can be seen from the fact that both have been translated into Odia. Sainath’s book has been translated by Abhay Singh,
and has been published by a leading local NGO, Sahabhagi Vikas Abhiyan. *Diary saga saga* has been re-titled (as *Sujān Tāndira sansāra*) and translated by Abhimanyu Bagarti (2006), and has been published by Lark Books, a leading Odia publisher from Bhubaneswar. During the initial phases of fieldwork in the district headquarters of Bhawanipatna and in a couple of block headquarters, this researcher would often be asked about his research. One of the first pieces of advices offered would be to read the books by Sainath and Tejinder. Instead of being ‘reflective’ of the ‘reality’ of Kalahandi they have somehow becomes constitutive of it.

The book by Sainath is a compilation of reports that he filed from 13 of the poorest districts in India out of which four were from Odisha. Out of the four in Odisha, Nuapada and Kalahandi were part of the undivided Kalahandi district. A majority of the reports collected in *Everybody loves a good drought* were initially published in the Times of India, one of the largest circulated English dailies in India. Out of the 68 reports that are collected in this volume, nine are from Nuapada district that was a sub-division of Kalahandi district till the early 1990s. These reports deal with exploitation of farmers and peasants by moneylenders and traders, the crumbling public health system, a misguided dairy development programme, and the problems of migrants. But Sainath takes care to present facets of this region that often escape scrutiny by the media; he tells us a story about a successful case of community protection of forests, and of the hope that small-scale commercial exploitation of native tree species such as Bumar hold for augmenting local livelihoods (Sainath 1996). But in popular perception the story that Sainath tells is that of unremitting misery in Kalahandi. During doctoral fieldwork many venerable and respectable old men, impeccably upper-class and upper-caste, would often complaint about ‘negative publicity’ about the district, and Sainath’s book would often be seen as ‘the’ culprit.

In the more literary circles, *Diary saga saga* by Tejindar, a journalist, was referred to frequently as being a particularly ‘hard hitting’, long-form journalistic account of the poverty and destitution of Western Odisha in general, and of Kalahandi in particular. He sees the poor as voiceless and provides ‘observations’ of deprivation and
destitution that often remind one of Western journalists’ descriptions of famine-ravaged Africa. The people of the region that populate the narrative offered by Tejinder are desperately poor, always lack food to eat, are mercilessly exploited by upper-caste/upper-class elites, and have very little agency. The local penchant for festivities (most of which revolve around crops or local deities) is dismissed as another example of the foibles of a passive population for ‘religious’ nonsense (Bagarti 2006).

This kind of reporting is indicative of most of the stories that come out in national-level publications on the region. This is evident when one analyses a few of the news reports published in The Hindu during the period January 2009 to February 2010. During this period there was an epidemic of diarrhoea and dysentery that affected more than 44 villages in the district and left more than 40 people dead. This was extensively covered. In a follow-up article in the newspaper dated 29 January 2010 on children made orphans due to the epidemic it reported, “these children are the new generation of orphans. Deaths due to diarrhoea and malaria are not new to these remote villages of Kalahandi.” The newspaper also reported on the politics of bauxite mining and refining in Kalahandi. For example, an opinion piece by Siddharth Varadarajan (13 April 2009) tried to understand local electoral politics, while another report (28 January 2009) detailed the resistance of ‘primitive Dongria and Jharnia tribes’ to the proposed mining of bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills in the district. Thus, for The Hindu Kalahandi continued to remain a remote land plagued by epidemics that sometimes threw up an occasional protest against the onward march of capitalist development.

Poetry from Kalahandi

Parallel to the process of emergence of an image of Kalahandi as a region of starvation and destitution (starting in the mid-1980s), there has been a growth of political and dalit poetry in Odia, with three poets key to such a process of change being from the undivided Kalahandi district. This sub-section focuses on the work of these three key poets; they are

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20 For examples of coverage of this epidemic, see reports in The Hindu on the following dates: 16 August 2009, 1 September 2009 and 2 September 2009.
Basudev Sunai, Akhil Nayak and Bharat Majhi. The work of these poets marks a significant watershed in the evolution of Odia poetry.

The poetry of an earlier generation (for example, as exemplified in poems by poets such as Ramakanta Rath and Sitakant Mahapatra) was marked with ‘borrowed’ high-modernist idioms and frames such as ‘death-consciousness’ and myths. The poets from Kalahandi have consciously chosen to write within a tradition that provided an alternative to the one exemplified by Rath and Mahapatra. This alternative tradition saw itself as part of a broader international trend of progressive literature that was politically committed. In Odia poetry, poets such as Sachi Routray and Anant Patnaik were the most significant voices in this alternative tradition (Mohanty 2006).

All the three poets from the undivided district of Kalahandi listed above have chosen to write political poetry that has self-consciously dealt with the contemporary. Through their engagements with the Odia literary-scape by the promotion of identity-based journals such as Dernā and progressive journals such as Nisān, they have tried to strengthen this trend in Odia literature. These three poets and the increasingly important strand of poetry that they have given birth to now articulates an important subaltern position, especially that of dalits. A key text in this regard is a volume of poetry titled Asprusya (Untouchable) by Basudev Sunani that was first published in 2001. This volume has poems of varying quality, some which are emotionally-charged, unadorned pieces of naked anguish. Apart from poetry Basudev Sunani has recently written a book on the dalits of Western Odisha living in the region drained by the River Mahanadi titled Dalita sanskrutira itihāsa (2009). The poems of Akhil Nayak are much more understated. He has recently shifted to fiction with perhaps the first dalit novel in Odia published in the pujā issue of the literary journal Paschima. This journal has also played a key role in creating a space for politically engaged literature over the last couple of decades or so.

22 Dernā is an irregularly produced journal that for the last decade or so has been trying to create a space for the articulation of a dalit social, political and literary identity in Odia and Odisha.
23 Pujā issue refers to the special issues of Odia literary journals that are produced on the occasion of the Durgā pujā festival in the month of Asvina (September–October). But generally speaking, the notion of a
A large part of the production of such literature, especially poetry, has involved articulating the experience of being an Odia and a dalit (although Bharat Majhi is not a dalit by birth whereas Akhil Nayak and Basudev Sunani are). Although they occasionally use words commonly used in Kalahandi to remarkable effect, they still use standard Odia as the medium of choice for their poetry. They also work broadly within the tenets and frames of Odia literary modernity that was fashioned in the latter half of the nineteenth century by poets such as Radhanath Ray. Most poems by these poets are free-verse; very rarely if ever, they use the poetic forms used by the subaltern social groups in Kalahandi. Thus, the reaction to the excesses of high modernism has been by making poetry a site for thematic re-articulation, where poems increasingly talk about the brutal experience of subaltern groups of violence by the state and of cultural alienation. But these poets have paid very little attention to the formal architecture of the extant tradition of modern Odia poetry, and have not questioned or challenged it to any significant extent.

The framing of the district of Kalahandi as a geography of hunger sees the relationship between development and politics as an inverse/negative one, and ignores the formal transformations of the state. Similarly the creation of a body of self-consciously fashioned dalit literature has been based on an identity created by caste-based discrimination. This articulation has involved the challenging of the status quo in Odia poetry by bringing politics in as a mere thematic. This relative negligence of forms, of the state in the case of readings of politics of development and the domestication of politics as a mere theme of poetic composition and naturalisation of certain poetic forms are analogically similar processes that occlude understanding of everyday practices.

**Literary prose from Kalahandi: memoirs and novels**

Kalahandi has produced many litterateurs across generations. Prominent among them have been writers of fiction such as Bhubaneswar Behera and Uttam Kumar Pradhan and

special pujā issue is a bit of a misnomer since more often than not, this is the only issue that most Odia literary journals produce in a year.
playwrights such as Prafulla Kumar Rath. Instead of giving a comprehensive overview of
the prose produced either on Kalahandi or of authors from Kalahandi, this sub-section
picks a few indicative texts that aid our present discussion. In this regard two novels, a
are discussed and analysed. Apart from this four memoirs/autobiographies by writers
era* (2000) and *Atma katha* (2001) are also discussed.

The first novel *KOID* is a thinly veiled and fictionalised account of the writer’s
experience of the 1965–66 drought in Kalahandi. The novel has two distinct narratives
that meet each other briefly: one narrative is of the travails of an ordinary peasant family
and their village Bhatimunda (near Khariali town of the then Nuapada subdivision of the
Kalahandi district) in the drought, and the other of the district and state level responses to
the drought situation by politicians, bureaucrats and journalists. The family headed by
Kapila leaves for a relief camp run in Khariali as a governmental response to the drought.
The story from then on takes a predictable turn. He loses his wife and daughter, and at the
end of the drought is only left with his two sons. The daughter commits suicide after she
is jilted in love by the contractor who runs the relief work in Khariali. One of the sons
then takes revenge by killing the contractor, is captured, and awarded life imprisonment.
He later comes back to his village after getting released early to be reunited with a
brother who in the meanwhile had migrated to Surat for work and has now come back.
The other strand of the narrative focuses on the collector Sundarmohan, Superintendent
of Police Sudhiranjan, and a local politician Mardaraj; each one of them, despite different
motivations, is shown jostling for space, with the human tragedy caused by the drought

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24 Written by S.C. Mishra, who was the Superintendent of Police of Kalahandi district during an important
drought in the period 1965–66. The original novel, titled *Kalahandi and the rain god*, was published in
25 The first novel of the poet Akhil Nayak.
26 Written by the academic, engineer and fiction writer Bhubaneswar Behera. Behera, apart from playing
other important roles, was also the vice-chancellor of Sambalpur University at located at Sambalpur,
Odisha. This memoir is written in the third person with the narrator being named ‘Buddhadeba’.
27 Written by Odia playwright Prafulla Kumar Rath.
28 Written by P.K. Deo, the last king of Kalahandi, politician and long-serving Member of Parliament in
postcolonial India
29 Written by a relatively anonymous teacher Kaliprasad Mishra, who is, incidentally, a friend and
schoolmate of dramatist Prafulla Kumar Rath.
becoming just another aspect of the unfolding political drama. This novel is then another
chronicle of state failure, where even when well-intentioned actions of the state fail
because of lack of capacity (Mishra 2005).

The novel Bheda\textsuperscript{30} details out the story of a father and son duo from a village in
Kalahandi; the father is a teacher, and the son is a social activist. Unlike KOID which is
uniformly written in the standard dialect of Odia, a large number of words used in the
local Kalāhāniā dialect of Odia find their way into Bheda. Unlike KOID that mostly
describes events set in the 1960s, the events in Bheda self-consciously roll out in the
recognisable present. Bheda is also consciously more ‘political’. Its narrative structure
and the way specific events follow from one another seem governed more by the
imperative to demonstrate the perceived semi-feudal, semi-colonial character of the state
in India than any imperative stemming from the pure force of narrative per se (Nayak
2008b).

In terms of the social origins of the writers, Mishra is a Brahmin from central
Odisha, whereas Nayak is a dalit from Kalahandi. The two novels have been written
almost a decade apart. But in a remarkable way they are very similar. Both chronicle the
failure of the developmental state in India and show, simultaneously, the inability of the
state to transform the local social conditions, and the apparent efficacy of its coercive
apparatus.

All the four memoirs mentioned in the beginning of this section have been written
by people who belong to more or less one generation, the generation that started going to
school just before India got her independence. All of them also belong to the two of the
dominant castes in the district; Behera, Mishra and Rath are Brahmins whereas Deo
belongs to the erstwhile ruling family of the princely state of Kalahandi and was the king
of the state at the time of its merger with India. There are remarkable similarities in the
ways in which these autobiographies narrativise the district and the state. The most
remarkable element of these four autobiographies/memoirs is perhaps this—although all

\textsuperscript{30} Literally division but can also mean crack or an intrusion.
these four autobiographies have been published after the period 1985–88 in which Kalahandi came under public gaze because of stories of starvation and child sale, none of these actually engage with these stories in a significant manner. It would seem that the Kalahandi of the 1980s and the Kalahandi these memoirists inhabit are located in two different planets.

But these stories are stories of ‘absences’ in many other ways as well. Behera discusses in detail the process of becoming an important public figure in Odisha as an academic and as an institution builder; but one finds very little material in this narrative of his life as a writer. Mishra’s autobiography has no discussions of what it meant to teach in ‘backward’ places such as Nuapada and Mohangiri. Rath reveals very little of his family life; this is true of the other three as well.

All the four memoirs/autobiographies are essentially narratives of self-fashioning; of Behera as an engineer and academic, of Mishra as a teacher, of Rath as a dramatist and of Deo as a politician and parliamentarian. Deo narrates the politics of fashioning the regional state in Odisha out of the fragments of colonial geography, and his role in fashioning parties such as Ganatantra Parishad, and his patronage of big statist developmental projects such as the Upper Indravati Project. Behera discusses the processes by which the state is made visible through his personal contributions as an engineer in the construction of the multipurpose Hirakud project on River Mahanadi, and the setting up of the Regional Engineering College at Rourkela (now the National Institute of Technology, Rourkela). Mishra tells the story of the ways in which local politics interferes with the proper delivery of education through the public school system. Rath discusses his experience as a dramatist and the state as a patron of culture. A large part of these narratives, therefore, may be read as narratives of the hidden memories of the Indian state and its various failures and not as mere reflections of individual persons.

31 The Upper Indravati Project is a multipurpose river valley project on River Indravati, a tributary of River Godavari in peninsular India. This project is one of the first examples of large scale transfer of water from one river basin to the other, in this case from the Godavari basin to the Mahanadi basin.
NGO narrative on Kalahandi

Over the last two and half decades, NGOs—local, regional, national as well as international—have become an important set of social actors in Odisha in general and Kalahandi in particular. With increasing NGO activity in the Greater Kalahandi region, especially by local ones such as Parivartan, Antodaya, Lokadrushti and Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan (SVA), these organisations have played an important role in framing Kalahandi. This sub-section takes one NGO, SVA\(^{32}\) as a case, and discusses some literature produced by this organisation as indicative of broader forms of the ways in which Kalahandi has been framed.

In the literature produced by the NGO (some of it consists of pre-published material), the actions of the postcolonial state are seen to have resulted in the problems of destitution and starvation in the undivided Kalahandi district. This literature argues that till the integration of the princely state of Kalahandi in the state of Odisha in independent India in 1948, the area did not experience any agricultural droughts due to robust local natural resource management systems. Apparently more than 40 per cent of the cultivated lands of the district were irrigated by traditional water harvesting structures that were promoted by the kings of the princely state. The postindependence nationalisation of these structures and their consequent decline due to governmental neglect is seen as an important reason behind the present destitution. Over-exploitation of forests of the region for timber and bamboo by the forest department of the postcolonial state is blamed for producing the same effects (Mohapatra and Panda 2001; Pradhan 2001).

\(^{32}\) SVA is an organisation headquartered in Bhubaneswar and has regional offices in four districts in Western Odisha: Bilenjore in Nuapada district, Padampur in Bargarh district, Paramanandpur near Bhawanipatna in Kalahandi district and Patnagarh in Bolangir district. It also has many field offices in these districts. The organisation has run a campaign for village self-government called Gram Swarajya Abhiyan, and has been advocating for natural resource management practices sensitive to local conditions. The most important functionary of the NGO, Jagdish Pradhan, is originally from Kalahandi, but now divides his time primarily between Kalahandi and Bhubaneswar. The organisation irregularly publishes a journal called Gaunli Bichara (literally ‘village thoughts’), a monthly newsletter called Gram Swarajya Abhiyan, and many handbooks, short pamphlets, leaflets, relevant translations and monographs.
At the same time, the literature produced by the NGO try and ‘rectify’ the image of Kalahandi produced by media that choose to focus on only the sensational, sometimes concocted, reports of child sale and starvation deaths (Gaunli Bichara 2003b). This literature foregrounds the agricultural productivity and diversity of the district, the quality of the produce of the district, and the fact that purely in terms of quantity of production of staples such as rice Kalahandi is a surplus district (Pradhan 2007a, 2002). Land availability and equity in land distribution are not seen as reasons behind the perceived destitution in Kalahandi as the per capita availability of land in Kalahandi is argued to be greater and the proportion of the landless labourers lesser than the relatively richer districts of Odisha (Pradhan 2001). Promotion of local, traditional varieties of food crops, restoration of traditional resource management structures and institutions and promotion of local initiatives are seen as key to the promoting of sustainable livelihoods, combating droughts and decreasing destitution (Gaunli Bichara 2003a; Majhi, Binapani 2007; Pradhan 2003, 2007b).

This literature produced by the NGO argues that it is the intrusion of the state that has produced the present state of destitution in Kalahandi and southwestern Odisha. State failure in the field of welfare of the people of this region is seen as twofold: as a matter of lack of ‘policy imagination’, of being wedded to the ‘big is beautiful’ conceptualisation of development, and as faulty implementation of policies and programmes that can go some way in reducing destitution. Thus, this NGO sees the problems of the undivided Kalahandi district through the lens of failure of public action and of state failure.

**Governmental literature on Kalahandi: the case of Kalā jharan**

Kalahandi has engendered the production of voluminous literature by various governmental actors and bodies. These include reports by various enquiry commissions into drought and deprivation in Kalahandi, debates on Kalahandi in the Odisha state legislative assembly and the Indian parliament and the various plan documents of both the national and state governments. Most of this literature sees the Kalahandi district, the greater Kalahandi region and South-West Odisha through the same lens which national
and international academic literature and media uses to frame Kalahandi (Jayal 1999; Currie 2000; Banik 2008).

Perhaps as an antidote to all this negative publicity and as a ‘brand-management’ exercise, the district administration of Kalahandi started an annual cultural festival held every January in the district headquarters of Bhawanipatna. This festival is organised by the Kalahandi district administration in collaboration with the district council of culture. This festival was initially called Kalahandi Utsav and was later renamed as Ghumura and it saw its fifteenth edition in 2011. Every year a souvenir called Kalā jharan is released to mark the festival. The title of the souvenir literally means a rivulet of the arts—in the local dialect kalā means the arts and jharan means a rivulet. Ghumura has become an important event, arguably the most important event, in the cultural and social calendar of the district. Kalā jharan is also an important publication in the district now by the sheer virtue of the regularity of its publication. The success of the annual festival can be gauged by the many other district-level festivals started in other districts of South-West Odisha subsequently.

During doctoral fieldwork issues for the years 1998, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2008 could be collected. In these six years, 84 out of 115 articles published (nearly 73 per cent) were on various topics related to the cultural, historical, archeological and social heritage of Kalahandi. There were a few essays in the souvenirs that directly dealt with various social problems in Kalahandi including destitution. But they were written in a style that was defensive, and tried to show that despite having many problems the district is culturally vibrant and has made some progress.

Thus, this analysis of the souvenirs shows that there has been an attempt by the district administration, an important level of the local state, to displace the conventional image of the district by fostering an alternative cultural production in the form of this annual festival and in promoting certain representations of the district as being culturally rich, if materially poor.

33 A traditional folk instrument of Kalahandi
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Kalahandi emerges around the year 1985 as a marginal area plagued by drought and starvation, a site *par excellence* for the workings of the emergent mission mode of state-fabrication. It has also given schematic accounts of various kinds of narratives that have framed such an emergence; some of these emerge from the media, others from within the academy, whereas others come from civil society organisations. But all these narratives play the role of framing of Kalahandi as a land of droughts, hunger and starvation deaths, as a place where government has failed. Otherwise like the articles published in *Kalā jharan* they try to shift the discussion to the realm of culture by portraying the district as materially poor but as being rich culturally. It is not that there are no differences within these different kinds of stories. Akhil Nayak and Bharat Majhi address concerns of class and religion in their poetry whereas Basudev Sunani deals more with issues surrounding caste. The autobiographies that were discussed get a varied set of concerns to the table, and follow very different narrative strategies; for example Behera uses a third person account whereas the others follow a more straightforward first person one. But, despite these differences, these narratives end up constructing *one* Kalahandi, a Kalahandi that is backward in developmental terms, a region where traditional governmental action has failed, and therefore in need of new kinds of responses by the government.

It is in this context that watershed development and the district watershed development mission as objects of study have been selected to understand the operations of this emergent mode of state-fabrication that attempt at rectifying the problems associated with earlier kinds of governmental action. The next three chapters identify some important aspects of these emergent forms of governmental action. Chapter IV provides a map of the tactics deployed in their mission mode of state-fabrication as evidenced in the workings of DWM, Kalahandi through the work of one project – WORLP - and the manipulations of these tactics by lower-level project staff and targeted project beneficiaries by their own set of tactics. Chapter V shows the emergence of ‘the social’ as a site of governmental intervention, and identifies convergence in the everyday
practices of governmental and non-governmental organisations as two key effects of the morphing of the state of the ground. Chapter VI argues that vernacular formulations surrounding the working of the regional state capture emergent processes of state-fabrication in a better fashion rather than theoretically overdetermined formulations such as political society.