CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate how the subsistence practices of the forest communities in the Central Provinces were influenced by their self-perception and their wide ranging and complex experiences in a changing world. The *adivasi*’ own livelihood choices were crucially affected by the changing power relationships in the wider agrarian structure of which they were an integral part. The impact of the changes in the use of forest and land was felt not only by the forest dwellers themselves, but by the graziers, craftsmen and peasants with whom they shared relations of mutual dependence. The developments between 1830 and 1945 described in this thesis, reshaped the social relations of the inhabitants of this region.

The survival strategies of forest communities were defined by their internal structures of authority. Survival in a subsistence society depended upon a delicate balance between three different activities - hunting, gathering and cultivation. This balance was maintained in an *adivasi* community such as the Baigas by the control of its men over family life. Age, experience and knowledge of forest resources and their use enabled some men to exercise authority over the whole community. Priests, medicine-men, and village elders regulated community behaviour by interpreting its 'oral traditions'. These in turn influenced individual behaviour and laid down the tasks that men and women were expected to carry out in order to fulfil their needs. The reproduction and survival of these subsistence forms relied on mechanisms that taught individual members what role they would play in community life.

The relationship between institutions that regulated community life and the wider state structure was a complex one. Before the coming of the British the *adivasi* villages enjoyed a good measure (albeit not unrestricted) of control over forest resources. The forest communities could practice their cultivation and extract forest produce in return for the labour services rendered and the forest produce they gave to the zamindars. But with the establishment of British rule
in the Central Provinces this situation changed markedly. The British administration curtailed the control of the village headmen and the zamindars over forest and wastelands. Forest laws banned *adivasi* cultivation practices and ensured that the forest dwellers would have to pay for their livelihood - either in terms of labour or in cash. But British efforts to regulate *adivasi* subsistence were not always successful. In the mid 19th century the Baigas deserted the state-owned forests when the forest laws were first applied, creating a shortage of labour in government forests. In other cases the Baigas simply ignored British authority. By the 1890s, however, the Baigas had reluctantly accepted the reality of colonial rule: some Baigas made the most of new labour opportunities and started to comply with the restrictions imposed by the forest department. But they understood these changes in the light of their own system of knowledge. In fact they attributed the failure of their crops and epidemics, for instance, to the anger of their ancestors and to their failure to protect their "traditional occupations".

The developments of the 19th century had a profound effect on the structures of authority that regulated the subsistence practices of the *adivasis*. With the restrictions over forest use and cultivation in forests, the village elders could only use their knowledge of the forest to exercise power over others in a limited way. Further the introduction of "modern and scientific education" led to a partial erosion of the authority of village elders, priests and medicine-men. While they retained the powers to foretell the future and interpret "oral traditions", they ceased to be the only people from whom community members could learn techniques of survival. Missionaries, who first opened educational institutions in *adivasi* areas, showed the *adivasis* new ways of earning their livelihood.

In the mid 19th century, to meet their basic needs, the forest communities relied upon relations of reciprocity with other communities like craftsmen and
grazers, whose survival in turn depended on their association with the forest dwellers. It has been shown that the British forest policy and the formation of grazing reserves not only resulted in a loss of subsistence amongst the Banjara graziers: it also caused the adivasis to lose their vital supplies of salt and oil. Similarly, European mining enterprise effectively denied the Agaria iron smelters their mining rights and also meant that the Baigas could no longer depend on them for new axes. The integration of the forest communities into the world market in the 1890s and early 20th century led to changes in the relationship between them and other communities. The most significant amongst these was the rupture in the links between the craftsmen and the forest dwellers. The penetration of European managing agencies into forests led to the changes in the production of lac, tussar silk and tans. The forest communities continued to extract lac and tans in the same way as before, only now they sold it to Europeans for export. As a result lac craftsmen and silk dyers were forced to look for new occupations.

Further the competition over the access to resources such as patch cultivation tracts and grazing reserves grew intense in this period. This gave rise to a new degree of conflict between communities and created new patterns of internal differentiation in which economic differences were pronounced. The relationship between peasants and adivasis also changed considerably with the deforestation of land and the control over grazing rights. Some Gonds became peasants, others were forced to become landless labourers. But since the state controlled the expansion of plough cultivation and restricted the shifting of fields by the Gonds and other forest communities, many Gond tenants were forced to depend upon part-time labour to earn additional income, whereas others grew increasingly reliant on money lenders. Moreover, because most Gond tenancies were on 'inferior soils', the fallow cycles in their plough cultivation were very long: as a result the productivity of their lands decreased every year and could
not meet their consumption requirements. In these circumstances Gond peasants were forced to depend on some techniques of shifting cultivation on their tracts.

The 1930s saw a politicization of the *adivasi* question due to increasing conflict over subsistence and the harsher control over the forests. The Congress nationalists launched the forest *satyagraha* in 1930-31 in which the *adivasi* people living in state-owned forests participated for the first time in mass protests against the British forest policy. But the *adivasi* protest did not conform to the Congress methods of agitation and the Congress eventually disowned responsibility for Gond action against forest laws. Instead, the Congress leadership in the province felt that the *adivasis* needed to be educated in the Gandhian ways of living. The 'Basic Nationalist Education Scheme' proposed to do this in 1937. The Bihar Congress government's experience with the Santhal agitation for a separate state in Chhotanagpur influenced the Congress leadership in the Central Provinces to oppose the 'exclusion' of the *adivasis* between 1935-1944. The 'exclusion debate' was concerned with two issues: how to stop the exploitation of the *adivasis* by the non-*adivasis* and the state; and how to 'modernize' the forest dwellers without marginalizing their culture. While Elwin and the officials recommended special measures for the protection of the *adivasis*, the Congress and most nationalist anthropologists opposed exclusion. A dominant segment of the nationalists proposed the 'acculturation' and 'assimilation' of the *adivasis* into peasant societies.

While the 'spirit of protection' was not new to British policy, the import of the 'policy of exclusion' was significant. The 'national park policy' for the 'scheduled tribes' in independent India was influenced by the need to protect the rights of the forest communities. Under the influence of Nehru, it was felt that the 'tribes' could only be integrated into the Indian nation if their culture and rights were protected. The 'exclusion' debate's focus on 'tribal education' in *adivasi* areas reflected the extent to which intervening agencies had become aware of
the importance of the social and cultural dimension of economic change. Consequently there was a conflict between political groups and agencies to control the education of the forest communities. In the process the *adivasi* communities began to be treated as isolated entities whose links with their own world were severed.