INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines changing forms of subsistence amongst the forest dwellers of the Central Provinces. It focuses, in the main, on the Baigas and the Marias who lived in the tracts that currently comprise eastern Madhya Pradesh and parts of Vidharba.\(^1\) It attempts to provide a broad picture of their changing subsistence practices, the attitudes towards them, and of the British intrusion into the forests of the Central Provinces. The study endeavours to capture the complex system of subsistence practices and relations: taking into account the fact that subsistence involves both economic activity and cultural behavior. Therefore the thesis seeks to situate the history of subsistence within an examination of the self images of subsistence societies and the attitudes of those who sought to transform them.

While this study provides a general overview of British agrarian strategy between the years 1830 to 1945, its focus is on three specific periods. The fifteen years from 1865 to 1880 are important in many respects. During this time the foundations of colonial rule and forest administration were laid and the marginalization of the subsistence forms of the forest communities was first attempted. The first survey and settlement of this region was also conducted during these years.\(^2\)

In the next crucial decade, from 1890 to 1900, rules for forest administration were altered to curtail the powers of the zamindars of the hilly tracts of the Province. The second settlement was carried through\(^3\) and at this time a determined bid was made to expand plough cultivation into forested areas. These developments considerably changed the relations between the forest and peasant communities. They ushered in an era where subsistence economies and the capitalist market developed a close, but complex, relationship with each other.

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1 The former princely states and British districts of western Madhya Pradesh do not fall within the purview of this study.
2 The first land revenue surveys and settlements were conducted between 1867 and 1869 in most districts of these Provinces.
3 The second land revenue settlements of the entire province took place between 1891 and 1898.
other. While in some cases the market helped to fulfill the needs of subsistence groups, in other cases it brought these societies into conflict with each other. The third period focused on is from 1930 to 1945. The distinct nature of the *adivasi* identity of the 'tribe' was affirmed at this time. The foundations of the policy of exclusion were laid, fostering a new sense of fraternity and a unity amongst the forest communities. The centrality of education for the forest communities in the scheme of 'protection' reflected the concern of all intervening agencies to 'civilize' the 'aboriginal mind'. These three periods influenced the history of the subsistence systems in forests. Each had a long-term effect on the lives of the forest dwellers and also influenced the 'tribal policy' of independent India. A study of these changes thus provides significant insights into the present-day conditions of the forest people, as well as on the nature of 'subsistence' itself.

The thesis comprises six chapters. Structurally it may be divided into two parts. The first three chapters concentrate on the processes that define the parameters of subsistence systems in forests and outline the specific measures undertaken to alter these subsistence forms. These chapters discuss the relationship of different subsistence activities with the forest. They show that forest communities are not isolated, but cooperate and compete with other forest, peasant, trading, crafts, and grazing communities, for their survival.

The first chapter deals with the modes of cultivation in forested areas and their relationship with the forest. It aims to study the relationship between a form of shifting cultivation practised by the Baigas (*bewar*) and their hunting and gathering activities. Collective male authority and the seasonal rhythm of subsistence activities (termed *dhaiya*), order the relationship between hunting-

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4 The term 'adivasis' is used by the forest communities of Central India to describe themselves. It is representative of a multiple identity. The forest dwellers see themselves both as part of the wider network of the forest people of these Provinces, and as members of specific communities and of specific villages. Of these identities, the village identities are the strongest. When people from one village are invited to another village, they acquire the status of 'guests'. The articulation of this identity is contextual.
gathering and cultivation activities. The study suggests that the success of a *dhaiya* cycle is intrinsically dependent on the success of the crop in the first year of *bewar* cultivation. The cultivation form itself is determined by geographical and topographical factors which do not allow the successful practice of plough cultivation in these areas. This was one of the main reasons for the failure of efforts to expand plough cultivation since the late 1870s. This chapter also discusses the relationship between Baiga mythology and *bewar*. It attempts to show how the stories of Nanga Baiga (the first Baiga) were used to resist plough cultivation.

The second chapter is about the modes of forest use in the Central Provinces. The first part analyzes the different uses of and ways by which forest produce was extracted by the peasants, craftsmen and the *adivasis*. Through a discussion of these the nature of subsistence relationships between these communities are studied. In the case of lac, it is argued, that there was a crucial link between the survival of craftsmen and the breeding of the lac cocoon by the *adivasis*. There was also competition for maximum control over the trees on which lac cocoons flourished. Similarly, the survival strategies of the Agarias (an iron smelting caste) and of the forest dwellers were integrally linked to each other. In the second half of the 19th century there were determined efforts to change the nature of these subsistence relationships and incorporate the forest communities within the colonial economy. These changes were of two types: changes brought about through the introduction of 'scientific forestry', and those brought about by the international demand for lac, tans and minerals. The nature of the intrusions affected the subsistence relationships and disrupted the seasonal rhythm on which the *dhaiya* system depended.

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5 In the *bewar* system each field is cultivated for three years and the agricultural cycle for each year is different from the previous years. After three years the cultivators plough another field for another three years. The cultivators only return to the first field after the regeneration of the forest, (which on an average takes nine years on one field), has taken place.
The third chapter is on the relationship between the grazing rights (of the peasants and graziers) in forests and *adivasi* subsistence. It discusses the impact of the formation of the grazing reserves on peasant and Banjara subsistence. The chapter contends that the legalization of common rights in 'wastelands' was a result of a need to fulfil the colonial objective of maximising of revenue. It brought the graziers and the forest dwellers in closer contact with each other and facilitated the creation of new social and economic relationships between them. The direct effect of the grazing laws on *adivasi* subsistence depended upon the location of the grazing reserve and the pressure of the population in that reserve. If the reserve was located near a forest village or on the Banjara trading circuit there was a direct impact on *adivasi* subsistence. Grazing laws also had a profound impact on the politics of the region. In 1930 the Congress made its first attempt to focus on the exploitation by the foresters as a major national issue. They started a forest *satyagraha* and projected grazing as the single most important issue for mobilizing *adivasi* and peasant communities. The forest dwellers (especially the Gonds) showed that they were not always willing to comply with the Congress strategy.

The second part of the thesis deals with broad changes in the agrarian society of the Central Provinces and their impact on subsistence systems in forested areas. An effort is made to look at the inter-connections between forest and sedentary agriculture societies. In the last three chapters of this study the focus is on the interface between plough cultivation and *bewar*; 'upland' economies and the economies of the 'plains'; and the zamindari areas and *khalsa* (state owned) areas.

Chapter four concentrates on the relationship between the nature of zamindari power, control of forests and wasteland management. Officials like R. Temple and R.H. Craddock contended that the importance of zamindaris lay in their ability to administer remote and hilly estates. Because of this the British
wanted to maintain the zamindari system as an administrative unit. At the same time the British also desired to control the zamindar's economic power. The main aim of the forest laws in zamindari areas was to curtail zamindari control over land and forest resources. In the reclassification of zamindaris in the 1890s, zamindaris of political importance were given control over their 'wastelands' and forests, but they had to conform to the forest rules of the khalsa areas. The forest rules of the zamindari areas curtailed bewar. This measure was significant as the Baigas were migrating from khalsa to zamindari areas in the years before 1890, when the restrictions over bewar were confined to state-owned forests. Feudatory zamindaris like Bastar witnessed a far more aggressive adivasi response to these rules than did the zamindaris in the khalsa areas. The Maria protest in Bastar (1910) provided adequate evidence of this.

The links between the expansion of plough cultivation, creation of new settlements, and changes in the dhaiya system are explored in the fifth chapter. The process of deforestation (by the forest department) became important in the wake of rising revenue imperatives of the colonial government. The officials also realized that the best way to control bewar cultivation was to remove the forest cover and bring the Baigas under direct control of the land revenue administration. To make the process of expansion of sedentary cultivation an economically viable proposition, the settlement of "high class cultivators" from the plains and the North Western Provinces took place on adivasi lands. The lack of political will to overcome the ecological constraints of 'upland' regions, forced 'outsiders' and adivasi cultivators (who took to the plough) to adopt some techniques of bewar cultivation. Indeed the distinction between bewar and permanent cultivation became very obscure once sedentary cultivation spread in 'highland' areas and the pressure of population on 'unreserved' and 'disforested' lands increased.
The final chapter deals with the 'exclusion debate' and the policy of protection which aimed to 'modernize' the adivasis without exposing them to the "evil and exploitative elements" of modern civilization. In the Act of 1935, a provision was made for the exclusion of "aboriginal areas" from the normal working of the Constitution. Instead, these areas were to come under the direct rule of the Governor's Council which was not to be accountable to the legislature for its actions. This provision acquired great political importance. Therefore different segments of the administration, the nationalists, Elwin and the missionaries participated in the 'exclusion debate'. Apart from analyzing the dynamics of the debate, the chapter shows that the need for "protecting the aboriginal" from modern society was a result of colonial actions since the mid-nineteenth century. Previous failures to transform and 'civilize' adivasi life made all interventionist agencies realize that the transformation of the "aboriginal mind" was integrally linked with any desire to bring about material transformation in their subsistence system.

What is Subsistence?

Since the late 1970's, the study of subsistence has concentrated around the analysis of those activities that were directed towards the fulfilment of the most basic needs of 'every-day life'. It has been argued that the community determines its needs and habitual responses from a pool of common knowledge which is transmitted to community members in the process of their socialization. This knowledge can be understood as the cognitive basis which structures a community's conception of the world. Studies of subsistence must bear in mind the nature of the community's perception of its needs which is, in

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part, influenced by their system of knowledge, and the relationship of this knowledge with the wide-ranging experiences of the community in a changing world. This knowledge comprises a wealth of information about the forest and natural resources of the region, the roles of men and women in satisfying needs, and the social codes which govern community life.

The transmission of this knowledge from one generation to another is mediated by stories and myths. Elders and the priests of the community confer on these myths the power to direct all individual and group action. The self-image of the community is also expressed in terms of these stories and myths. This is illustrated by the case of the Baiga community. Stories of Nanga Baiga (the first Baiga) are used by the Baiga elders to lay down the attributes of an 'ideal' Baiga life. Thus the Baigas will not use the plough because Nanga Baiga has forbidden them to do so. They will only wear a langoti and eat kodon and kutki because that is what their originator wore and ate. The description of the Baiga world is centred around the deeds of Nanga Baiga. Deviant phenomena are also understood through the medium of Nanga Baiga. They see disease as an outcome of Nanga Baiga's anger. The actions of Nanga Baiga are thus used to enforce a code of conduct within the society and protect the Baiga way of living.

On the other hand agencies that intervened in subsistence systems also acted on the basis of their perceptions of that system. This thesis argues that 'modern' lifestyle of 19th century England formed the vantage point from which these agencies formulated their image of forest communities. Though perspectives differed, all notions of modernity had certain common elements - the belief in a market economy dependent solely on monetary transactions and a thinking that was influenced by the belief that the development of a 'scientific temper' was the key to the advancement of 'backward people'. There was a broad agreement amongst ethnographers, officials and missionaries on the need for a 'civilizing mission' for the forest communities, this 'mission' was conceived of in different
ways. The official image of the adivasis influenced the nature of the governance of subsistence societies. The images constructed by intervening agencies thus constitute an important basis on which blueprints for changes in adivasi societies were drawn up. These images influence the writing of the sources available on the adivasi societies in the Central Provinces.

**Sources:**

This thesis is based on research done in the National Archives and the archives of Nagpur, Bhopal, and some districts like (Mandla and Balaghat) between 1990-92. It relies heavily on official records of various departments mainly at the national, state and district levels and some official records from the offices of the Conservator of Forests. The unofficial records relied upon are the Verrier Elwin papers, some All India Congress Committee papers, and reports of the Nagpur daily, *Hitavada*. Collections of folk songs and folk tales, and ethnographies by both officials and non-officials have also been consulted. Missionary records are available at the Methodist Church Archives in Bombay and the Warne Memorial library in the Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur. These and private collections of local historians have also been most helpful in this research.

All these sources reflect the specific relationships that ethnographers, officials, and other agencies established with adivasi society. A major part of these texts are accounts of every-day life and personal histories, now considered important sources of history. Through the texts, the people whose "evidence" was being recorded gained access to an otherwise distant outside world. Verrier Elwin’s use of personal histories is a classical example of this. In *The Baiga*, Elwin wrote sixteen life histories under the title -'The Life-Stories Of Typical Baiga'.

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7 See Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist Amongst the Historians and Other Essays*, (1990, Delhi).
His choice of informants was dictated by his own personal relationships with these people. After describing his personal relations with them he went on to ask them questions about their place of birth, the villages they had shifted from, and any heroic deeds that they had accomplished. The narratives were in the present tense and the informants words were translated by Elwin himself. From an aggregation of individual experiences Elwin wrote a 'typical' Baiga history. In this sense, these sixteen chosen friends of Elwin were allowed to act as ideologues of their own system and acquired a new power in representing their system in the way they saw it. The self-image of Baiga society that we receive from Elwin's text is the product of the experiences and imagination of these sixteen people, invariably coloured by Elwin's own concerns.

Other ethnographies and records are also collections of such personal experiences, associations, and impressions. They embody the attitudes inherent in the personality of the writers and their society. Broadly speaking, the images of the forest people in these sources are of two kinds: 'romantic' and 'evolutionary'. While some of the texts and records fall into one specific strand of thought, others may incorporate both strands of thinking.

Romantic descriptions of the adivasis in the ethnographies of the 19th century emphasized a close relationship of the "forest people with their natural environment and history". In these texts the adivasis are seen as the "original inhabitants" of these 'wild' and 'natural' regions, living in harmony with their natural environment.9. The most important aspect of this stance was the

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9 There were two types of 'romantic' writings in the 19th century. The first was characterized by writings such as Fredrick J. Forsyth's, *Highlands of Central India: Notes on their Forests and Wild Tribes, Natural History and Sports*, (1889, London). Forsyth's travelogue was impressionistic often highlighting the 'naturalness', 'wildness' and freedom of those who lived in the "remote and rugged surroundings of the Satpura highlands". While emphasizing the "primiliveness" of the adivasis, Forsyth also overstated the importance of some ritual events that he happened to witness. This is true of the events described in W.H Sleeman's, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, (1826, London). The second type of romantic writing sees the 'natural' in terms of the behaviour of the adivasi people. This is especially true of the first missionary writings like Stephen Hislop's, *Papers regarding the Aboriginal Tribes of Central Provinces of India*, (1866, Nagpur). These papers emphasize that Gonds and other adivasis were "simple, shy and timid" people because of the "natural
comparison of the 'natural' world of the 'primitive' with the 'unnatural' modern world. But while the 'natural' was equated with the 'primitive', most ethnographers lamented the loss of the 'natural' things in a modern world.

The anti-modern political stance of the romantics was most clearly expressed by Elwin in the 20th century. In Aboriginal, Elwin described his perception of the adivasi in one line: "The tribe that dances does not die." For Elwin the 'primitive' was a romantic category essentially used to describe a set of cultural attributes that distinguished it from others. Describing the 'aboriginal' he said:

The life of a true aboriginal is simple and happy, enriched by natural pleasures. For all their poverty, their days are spent in the beauty of the hills. A woman carrying a load to the hill-top pauses a moment to see the scene below her. It is the 'sweet forest' the 'forest of joy and sandal' in which they live.

The 'forest of joy' was Elwin's dreamland - a place where people tended the dead, were devoted to the soil, staged a magnificent and colorful tribal festivals, and were infused with the spirit of sharing. For Elwin these were 'things of value in tribal life'.

Ideally Elwin wanted the forest dwellers to acquire the spirit and benefits of civilization without a painful transition process. The image itself was anti-modern. This was evident from his idea of the solution to the problem:

I advocate, therefore, for the aboriginals a policy of temporary partial protection, and for their civilized neighbours a policy of immediate reform....It is not enough to uplift them into a social and economic sphere in which they cannot adapt themselves, but to

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environment" they lived in. Further he stated that attempts towards their 'spiritual development' should avoid disturbing the "harmonious relationship that the Gonds had with their natural environment".

10 Elwin, Aboriginals, (1945, Delhi), p.76.
11 Ibid., p.29.
12 Ibid., p.18.
By advocating this position, Elwin showed how systemic change in forested areas, were organically linked to changes in modern society, which he considered decadent. For him the 'primitive' constituted a 'pure' and a 'pristine' state of existence that was morally superior to the civilized world. Elwin's image of the forest dwellers voiced his despair at the tendency towards the destruction of an idyllic society. Hence his effort to turn the clock of history backwards by restoring to the forest dwellers the rights, he thought, were originally theirs.

The romanticism of some British officials in the 20th century, like W.V. Grigson, was much milder than the anti-modern sentiments expressed by Elwin. The main aim of Grigson's writing, especially, The Maria Gonds of Bastar, was to find the best method for the preservation of community institutions. Drawing from the 19th century naturalist tradition, he contended that the adivasis were living in harmony with 'nature' and doubted the ability of forest dwellers to live a modern life. Grigson emphatically argued that shifting cultivation did not damage forests. He also said that the 'tribal way of life' needed protection from the forces of capitalism which they were not adept at handling. The second tendency followed from the first. Grigson's empathy with the 20th century forest dweller led him to criticize state policy and propose alternative plans for the development of the forest dweller. By 1940's Grigson developed a scheme for the 'protection' for the forest communities.

The romantic writings on the adivasis pose two problems in studying the nature of subsistence forms in forested areas. First they give an exaggerated importance to terms like 'ecology', and 'nature' in their defense of the adivasi society. While it may be true to state that adivasi cultivation forms are ecologically viable, this is not adequately demonstrated by these sources. They

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13 Ibid., pp.31-32.
do not possess any evidence of geographical and topographical factors that influence the nature of agricultural practices.

Secondly, romantic writings on the *adivasis* overstate the importance and uniqueness of *adivasi* culture. This is true of both 19th and 20th century ethnographies and travelogues. For example Forsyth and Sleeman\textsuperscript{15} describe the process of diagnosis and cure of liver disease by the Baiga *gunia* (doctor) as a 'spectacular' event. Similarly the Baiga tiger stories in the *Panjab Notes and Queries* describe tiger hunting by the Baigas as an extraordinary event. An uncritical acceptance of these descriptions can render routine activities (such as hunting) 'spectacular' and 'magnificent', glossing over the hardship and deprivation that communities lived in. In order to gauge the significance of the survival strategies of forest communities the categories of analysis need to be subjected to rigorous examination. However the contribution of these writings lies in the fact that they provide a wealth of material on the belief system and the practices of the adivasi communities in these provinces.

"Evolutionary" writings, chiefly authored by missionaries and officials viewed the *adivasis* as 'uncivilized' and 'backward'. For the missionaries, 'evolution' meant the spiritual progress from Animism to Christianity. On one of their tours Mr and Mrs. Williams of Balaghat described Gond religion as :

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
a religon of fear, [whose] combination with the elasticity of their imagination, causes them to speak frequently of meeting and talking with the Devil himself.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

The Gonds were considered a part of the 'wild jungly' world with all its impurities especially with respect to their patterns and methods of worship. The missionaries were critical of the British State for neglecting its duty of promoting the Christian faith.

\textsuperscript{15} Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*.
\textsuperscript{16} *Balaghat Jungle Jottings* (hereafter BJJ), 5th November 1902 Number 9.
Officials, on the other hand regarded the "evolution" of the adivasis not mainly in spiritual, but in biological and social terms. The abstract from the Report of the Ethnological Committee shows this:

**TABLE 0.1: ABSTRACT FROM THE COMPARATIVE STATEMENT OF INDIGENOUS TRIBES:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>HABITAT</th>
<th>FORM OF WORSHIP</th>
<th>FUNERAL RITES</th>
<th>PECULIARITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Byga (Kolarian)</td>
<td>Seonee</td>
<td>influenced by Hinduism, but do not consider the cow sacred.</td>
<td>Those dead before the age of 10 yrs are buried, otherwise burnt</td>
<td>Claim superior position over Gonds; use charpoys; women eat apart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byga (Kolarian)</td>
<td>Raipur</td>
<td>Worship Mahadeo, Parvati; sacrifice pigs &amp; cocks</td>
<td>Three days after father dies the son feeds a fowl, and if fowl eats the grain the father's spirit is said to have come home. Fowl is sacrificed.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gond (Dravidian)</td>
<td>Bastar, Upper Godavery</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Burn dead.</td>
<td>Marriage not contracted till puberty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SOURCE: Home (public), 'A' Progs. 67-68, 30 May 1868, pp. 11-16)

Official ethnographers often created a series of misleading evolutionary differences between 'the more developed' and the so called 'undeveloped' races. For example the Baigas were considered inferior to the Gonds because the Gonds were assimilated into Hindu society and were thus a part of a more "civilized" culture.

Both evolutionary and romantic writers provide little or no information of the production processes and technologies in adivasi societies. They assumed that a society with 'primitive customs' would have a 'primitive economy'. At best their descriptions were superficial in nature, merely enumerating the subsistence practices undertaken by forest dwellers. In order to analyze the logic of subsistence production, this thesis has relied on scientific and technical studies on soils, crops, and forests to analyze these descriptions. Topographical evidence
from the Survey Of India and Geological Surveys were vital sources for its study of the under which *adivasi* subsistence forms survived. A critical interpretation of ethnographic sources provides enough evidence of power equations and property rights in these societies. The conclusions of this thesis can be further strengthened through a deeper study of agricultural science.