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## Frontiers of Capital: Exploring the Notion of Labor Among Hos of West Singhbhum, Jharkhand

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The state of Jharkhand continues to serve as a resource frontier being integrated into the global capital on unequal terms since the colonial times- a process that has not only led to mass displacement, land alienation and resource exploitation but also exposed the local ‘tribal ecologies’ to the vagaries of the neo-liberal market-economy and the state. The terms of integration to the larger forces are indeed biased against the local adivasi communities, however the former is constantly resisted, challenged, and shaped by the latter. Drawing on ethnographic data, I explore how people respond to incursions into their ‘tribal ecologies’—incursions which transform the physical landscape and radically alter local economic and political institutions. The findings reveal a sophisticated, emic articulation of ‘labor as a commodity’ among the Ho tribe of West Singhbhum as they engage with multiple forms of economic systems: communitarian reciprocity of labor, subsistence agriculture and industrial mining of limestone. I argue that local communities in resource frontiers are not passive victims of capitalist growth; rather, their socio-cultural formations have direct bearing on how capital operates and how they resist it.

Key words: Resource extraction, subsistence agriculture, denga-depenga (communitarian labor-sharing), gender, wage-employment.

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The state of Jharkhand, officially established as such in 2000, has served as a resource frontier since colonial times, beginning in 1774 when the British formally granted coal mining leases to the East India Company (George, 2009: 161–62). Since Independence, the process of state-led resource extraction has only intensified, reaching unprecedented scale and outreach during neoliberal reforms in the 1990s and paving a way for unchecked exploitation of minerals and ores by private companies. The process of resource extraction is considered an inert

phenomenon solely aimed at acquiring raw material for the consumption of global capital, but for the local populations in Jharkhand, such relentless resource exploitation has led to mass displacement, alienation of land, labor exploitation and loss of traditional livelihood. The state industrial complex based in continued resource extraction does not consider how local actors experience natural resource exploitation in the context of their adaptive tribal ecologies and social formations.

In this article, I argue that local communities in resource frontiers are not passive victims of capitalist growth; rather, their socio-cultural formations have direct bearing on how capital operates and how they resist it. I analyze how a sociocultural formation among the Ho tribe of Jharkhand both enables labor exploitation and fuels opposition against limestone mine-based exploitative labor regimes. As highlighted in this Special Issue, state developmentalism and extractive economies increasingly violate and encroach on tribal ecologies. Drawing on ethnographic data, I explore how people respond to incursions into their ‘tribal ecologies’—incursions which transform the physical landscape and radically alter local economic and political institutions. The findings reveal a sophisticated, emic articulation of ‘labor as a commodity’ among the Ho tribe of West Singhbhum as they engage with multiple forms of economic systems: communitarian reciprocity of labor, subsistence agriculture and industrial mining of limestone.

Building upon more than 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork based in a village, I would call Kainuwa<sup>1</sup>, in West Singhbhum district of southern Jharkhand I analyze how members of this Ho tribal community engage with a modern form of extractive capitalist enterprise—a local limestone mine—while also participating in their own community-driven subsistence agrarian economy. On the one hand, a modern form of capitalist production relies upon an impersonal and ‘freely’ available individual wage-labor. On the other hand, the Ho tribe members engage in a subsistence agrarian economy that involves a reciprocal labor-sharing *denga-depenga* system with long-established cultural norms. Below I examine the coexistence and interworking of these apparently discrete forms of labor, paying attention to how even with the global and translocal orientations of capital operations, the host community manipulates capital by adapting it to local cultural specificities. However, doing so reveals contradictions in the workings of capital that threatens the sustenance of the local economy and the sociocultural fabric of

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the village and respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

the community—factors that now drive Ho mobilization against the limestone mine.

I draw upon the analytic framework of anthropologists who have treated economic value not as something individually produced but rather as something emerging from meaning ascribed within specific social relationships (see for example, Marilyn Strathern 1988; Andrew Strathern 1979; Arjun Appadurai 1986; David Graeber 2001). Marxist tradition considers the value of commodities related to the individual labor invested during production (Duncan K. Foley 2000: 7), but many objects are not individually produced but derive from an outcome of social relationships (Graeber 2001: 39). In Kainuwa, people's participation at the mine was based around a capitalist mode of production—one can willfully sell one's 'free' labor in return for a market-determined remuneration. On the other hand, workers also engaged in *denga-depenga*, a communal labor-sharing arrangement and wage-based agricultural work for paddy cultivation; the conditions of *denga-depenga* and wages were determined by local socioeconomic norms. The village folks received much higher wages for quarrying limestones compared to cultivating the paddy for the same unskilled labor-time. However, people did not abandon agricultural work for mining work in pursuit of better remuneration. Instead, they engaged with both kinds of work, more often giving primacy to paddy cultivation over mining. A Marxist political economy framework treats a phenomenon like *denga-depenga* as an idiosyncratic outgrowth of the late arrival of capitalism in developing countries that leads to the co-existence of capitalist and non-capitalist relations of production. Rather than examine how such data are interpreted in the metanarratives of macroeconomics, I primarily focus on how local tribal actors make sense of the coexistence of multiple economic systems and discourses.

### **Jharkhand Statehood and Tribal Identity**

Though a relatively young state, Jharkhand was born out of the oldest movement for state autonomy in post-independence India, the "Jharkhand Movement". Political mobilization to carve out a separate state from Bihar began in 1938 (Munda and Bosu Mullick 2003: x). This movement is seen as a direct reaction to the ruthless processes to dispossess adivasis of their natural resources, first by the British and later by the Indian state in the guise of development (Stuligross 2001; Parajuli 1996). The process of internal colonial exploitation of the region began in 1774, when coal mining formally started with the first lease granted to the East India Company by the colonial government (George 2009: 161-62). The British

not only crushed tribal insurgencies in the region but also prepared the ground for its internal colonization, a condition that continued to flourish in post-Independence India. After Independence, the situation further deteriorated. The Jharkhand region emerged as a key location for mines, provoking more ruthless dispossession of the people. Furthermore, the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s paved the way for unchecked exploitation of minerals and ores by private companies (George 2009: 161-62). The protracted resistance of Jharkhand's people against this continuous dispossession of their land and natural resources since colonial times gave birth to the Jharkhand movement.

There are four major tribes in Jharkhand: Munda, Oraon, Santhal and Ho. The Ho tribe is predominantly concentrated in the southern part of the state, also referred to as Kolhan and home to some of the largest mining sites in the country. Kainuwa is in the West Singhbhum district that forms the southernmost part of Kolhan, sharing its border with the neighboring state of Odisha—a region also referred to as the Orissa-Jharkhand mineral belt where the highest iron ore deposits in the country are found. The geographical topography of the district is described as hills alternating with valleys and deep forests with 38 rivers and rivulets passing through it. The district has three major watersheds covering an area of more than 6,941 square kilometers. The total population of West Singhbhum district is 1.5 million, of which about 49.8 percent is male and 50 percent is female.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 85 percent of the populace lives in rural areas, and the primary sources of livelihood are based in agriculture, forest produce and daily wage labor.

Driving forces for both the Jharkhand Movement for the formation of a separate state and contemporary adivasi politics have included constant resistance against exploitation by the Dikus<sup>3</sup> and the British; a protracted struggle for water (*jal*), forest (*janggal*) and land (*jameen*); and a different way of life. However, the notion of a distinct ethnic identity, a rallying point for political mobilizations, has time and again been contested and thus variously interpreted by scholars. Leftist scholars have argued that besides shared cultural traits, the subjection of people to the same kind of economic exploitation generated a shared sense of class oppression and has been a major force in their mobilization (Nathan 2003; Alam 2003, Rana 2003; Roy

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<sup>2</sup> Census of India 2011

<sup>3</sup> *Diku* etymologically means other people; however, in this context it refers to the Hindu moneylenders, merchants and outsiders whose arrival in the region marked the beginning of exploitative, feudal practices leading to land alienation of resource usurpation of the adivasis (see Roy 1946; Hoffman 1961; Sinha et al. 1969; Sachidananda 1970).

2003). The movement has thus been seen as a sociopolitical expression of a pan-ethnic identity based in shared Jharkhandi culture (Bosu Mullick 2003; Keshari and Munda 2003). Other scholars view the movement as a transformation from demands based on ethnicity to assertions based on regionalism (Alloyusius 2003; Singh 2003). However, reducing ethnicity to regionalism betrays tribal political realities because the movement never aimed at simply demanding for more resources and special privileges for the region (Sharma 2003; Alam 2003). Thus, notions around Jharkhandi identity or tribal culture have never remained static and have morphed with changing political conditions (Prakash 1999; Hebbar 2003).

The formation of Jharkhand as a separate state in 2000 inaugurated a formal incorporation of a distinct ethnic and cultural identity of the region in the mainstream political discourse; however, the political gains did not translate into socioeconomic upliftment. On the contrary, the state projected processes of privatization, globalization and sanskritization as harbingers of sustainable development in the region (Bosu Mullick 2003: xvi). The state government, through its industrial policies, embarked on a path of neo-liberal, market-oriented development and deliberately pushed aside the long tradition of protest over control and access to natural resources (Jewitt 2008). Soon after state formation, a prominent human rights organization, Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action (BIRSA), called into question the reach of state control:

We have finally got the Jharkhand state, but what we have got is only a physical layout of the same. If we ask ourselves the question as to *who* controls the lives of people within this physical area, then in order to give an honest answer we would have to admit that the controls are not in the hands of the Jharkhandi people. At the economic level, outsiders and non-tribes, industrialists, merchants, traders, mine-owners, government employees and contractors own our waters, forests and lands as well as our mineral resources (BIRSA 2000).

The status of statehood proved to have little impact on fulfilling the original aspirations of the people for autonomous control over natural resources, vis-a-vis land, forest and water. Kainuwa presents a microcosm of the larger Jharkhandi movement. Here, a movement against limestone mining led by the villagers for five years eventually succeeded in stalling the mining operation. Based on my fieldwork and interviews with those involved in the movement, it is clear that the state police and local administration sided with the mining company—a pattern easily observed at the state level and across India.

For two years, I intermittently lived in Kainuwa village for extended periods. Initially, I encountered some degree of hesitancy with my informants given my identity as a *diku*, a non-Ho outsider. However, with my frequent visits, I developed good working relations with some key informants, which led other villagers to kindly allow me to carry on my research and eventually to generously participate in it. My positionality as a city-educated male researcher pursuing a Ph.D. from the U.S. and belonging to a “backward caste” helped allay initial suspicions that triggered by my “Bihari”, *diku* identity, a potential outsider-exploiter.<sup>4</sup>

In Kainuwa, a movement led by the villagers and aided by local activists, NGOs and the Jesuit Society fought for five years against land acquisition to expand limestone mining, despite a mine already in operation there for three decades that had met no resistance from the community. The community’s acceptance for the existing mine happened for two reasons: its operation was restricted to a confined area of *gora* land<sup>5</sup> and it provided an alternate source of steady wage-employment for the community and neighboring villages. Both conditions were radically altered with the proposed expansion of mine to 12 acres of arable land and a pattern of laying off workers with the installation of heavy machinery for the limestone quarry, thus leading to the resistance movement. During the movement, the state police and local administration, who were in cahoots with the mining company, enacted constant intimidation and pressure on local villagers—a pattern easily observed at the state level and across India—but the community eventually succeeded in stalling the mining operation. In this article, I set aside confrontations between the people and the state and mining company to focus on how the

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<sup>4</sup> Starting from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term *diku* assumed the meaning of ‘outsider exploiter’, used specifically for non-tribals from the plains who arrived in the region with the sole purpose of taking control over land and resources by extra-legal or deceitful means. By the 1970s, when the mine appeared in the village, working-class immigrants, including skilled/semi-skilled professionals who started arriving from North Bihar to work in the burgeoning extractive industry, were also being referred to as *diku* or ‘*diku* Bihari’ or just ‘Bihari’ (Sengupta 1980: 667; Sen 1972: 434; K. S. Singh 1972a: 377-378). While these newly arrived *dikus* were overwhelmingly employed in both, formal and informal sector jobs, the tribals worked only as contractual daily wage laborers.

<sup>5</sup> A type of hilly and rocky soil: very shallow to shallow-coarse textured, well drained, rocky and skeletal. This type of land is left fallow for most of the year except during winters when used to cultivate lentils.

community maintained the balance of labor supply to both mining and agricultural activities as long as the former did not pose a threat to the latter.

### **Mining Labor and the Ho Tribe**

Kainuwa is about four miles from a huge cement factory ‘ACC’ in Jhinkpani, that has been operational since 1948. Thus, the village is situated in a region exposed since colonial times to the vagaries of extractive industries that include mass displacements, land alienation, labor exploitation, severe environmental impacts and the exploitation of women and children in mining industries, all of which have led to chronic immiseration and the oppression of adivasi communities (George 2009: 157-86). According to the state’s socioeconomic parameters,<sup>6</sup> Kainuwa also lies in the ‘most backward’ Tonto block of West Singhbhum District. The main source of livelihood in the village is subsistence farming, horticulture, and daily wage labor. The village comprises 75 households of which 8 belong to Khandait and Gop<sup>7</sup> and the rest to the Ho tribe, a community predominant in the southwestern part of the state.

The Kainuwa limestone mine was owned and operated by Lakshmi Prasad Sau, a businessman based in the district town of Chaibasa. He was among the many businessmen and traders who migrated from neighboring states to capitalize on the emerging mining industry in the region. The emergence of Singhbhum as a major site for iron ore and limestone extraction drew many such traders and businessmen to Chaibasa, a known district headquarters since colonial times. From the 1950s onwards, with the intensification of extractive industries, small industrial towns rapidly mushroomed all over the Chotanagpur region, including Chaibasa, initiating mass displacement and land alienation<sup>8</sup>. The selective urbanization of industrial sites was further characterized by a sudden influx of *diku* business owners and traders that pushed the original inhabitants to the peripheries—both geographically and economically (Sengupta 1980; Areeparampil 1995: 29-35). This predatory

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<sup>6</sup> See “Jharkhand govt to develop six backward districts”, Indian Express, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jharkhand-govt-to-develop-six-backward-districts/> (accessed on 20 March 2020)

<sup>7</sup> These two communities officially belong to the Hindu OBC group, also referred as moolvaasi, and culturally integral to Ho adivasi villages.

<sup>8</sup> See Nirmal Sengupta, Economic and Political Weekly, Apr. 5, 1980, Vol. 15, No. 14: 664-671, 1960s onwards there was a rapid industrialization of Jharkhand (then southern Bihar) along with huge influx of immigrant outsiders in pursuit of jobs, trade, and business opportunities, especially the latter two avenues were disproportionately dominated and controlled by outsiders (*dikus*).

nature of urbanization and industrialization explains the initial fear and mistrust among Kainuwa residents generated by the acquisition of *gora* land for mining.

A local weekly magazine, *Singbbhum Ekta*, reported in one of its issues during the mid-1980s that the Lakshmi Prasad Sau mine, spread across three acres of land, employed around 400 laborers on a contractual basis in Kainuwa.<sup>9</sup> In an article entitled ‘Demand of legal rights by Kainuwa Mine Workers’, it reported that the mine produced about 5,000 tons of limestone every month at the minimal cost of just 15 rupees per ton, which was finally sold to ‘ACC’ at the rate of 70 rupees. Even though the mine had been operational for nearly 15 years, none of the mine workers were formalized, making it easier for the mine owner to flout labor laws and deprive workers of mandatory sick leave, minor accidental compensation, medical insurance, and provident funds. Most importantly, they were denied minimum wages for their labor. If the same mine was operated by ‘ACC’, the cost incurred for producing one ton of limestone would have doubled, going up to around 120 rupees. This significant increment in the production cost was due to the mandatory minimum wages fixed by the Central Wage Board under which the ‘ACC’ company was bound to comply. Thus, sourcing highly subsidized limestone for cement manufacturing at the ‘ACC’ factory resulted in an exploitative labor regime at mining sites operated by small mine-owners. The *Singbbhum Ekta* article appeared in 1984, just a year before the mine closed in 1985 after being in operation for almost 15 years.<sup>10</sup> The people of Kainuwa and neighboring villages had already survived almost a decade and half of exploitative and arduous work at the mine.

When I asked Kita Bari, a Ho tribal woman in her early 70s, whether she worked in the old mine, she responded in her usual jovial voice: “I have worked in the mine, and I also have done wage-labor to run my household, taken care of agriculture and raised my kids. Now, my kids are grown-ups and away working in *nala-desum*”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Singbbhum Ekta* Weekly, Year 8, Issue 26, December 1, 1984, Issue No. 33262/78

<sup>10</sup> According to Mohan Bari, son of Bahadur Bari, who served as the *Munshi* (accountant and supervisor) for the first mine that came in 1971, the mine was intermittently in operation until 1985.

<sup>11</sup> A place where you find wage work, ‘nala’ means work, *desum* might take on multiple meanings such as place/country/village, *nala-desum* is usually referred to mean a place of migration, where village folks have gone in search of work/employment, for better wages, opportunities and steady income.



and taking care of the expenses”. I never found Kita sitting idly in her courtyard; she was always busy, whether carrying cow dung to a pit, sweeping her courtyard, carrying firewood or making ropes from grass. The next time I interviewed Kita Bari she was with Niti Gop, her long-time friend and confidant; both had worked together in the mine and paddy fields in the village. Recalling their memories working together, Kita stated in a lively tone, “You remember how we worked at the mine.” Raising her hands, she gestured with her fingers:

After they would blast the boulders, we used to pick the rocks, of this size [*indicating with her fingers*], and carry them on our heads to fill in the boxes. The more you can work the more you will earn. We used to get there early in the morning. I and Niti used to work together and took turns on picking and carrying the stones. We used to think that if we missed a day of work, we would worry that we would be getting less money [weekly payment]. We used to think of money mostly, if we work more, we will earn more. In those days we had strength and endurance in our bodies, but now that is all gone.

The wage money earned from the mine was not just crucial for household expenses, it also helped to meet agricultural expenses and paddy cultivation. I asked all my respondents whether mining was on balance beneficial for Adivasis. People would respond with a sense of ambivalence, pointing out that mining was good as it provided work but bad in that its expansion risked exploiting more land. Sadho Bari, an octogenarian man, expressed similar views but with a more practical undertone. He stated, “Folks used to like that they could get work in the village—but those who could get work, for them it was good, and for those who could not, it was bad.” He pointed out how it helped fulfill the constant need for cash-income to sustain household and agricultural expenses. For many villagers, mining work served as a breather from out-migration to nearby industrial towns, a process both physically and psychologically straining. Plus, migration in search of new employment avenues was only available to men; women mostly stayed back in the village to look after their households and perform sedentary agriculturalism.

When mining started in the village, the wage for both agricultural and non-agricultural work was fixed at four rupees for women and six rupees for men, based upon the gendered division of agricultural tasks in the community. These rates are decided and revised periodically in a *gram sabha*, chaired by the Munda (village headman). Women do most of the agricultural work, particularly those tasks related to paddy cultivation, ranging from sowing, weeding, harvesting,

winnowing, and separating the chaff from rice. Men are mostly involved in ploughing, a task strictly considered for men because of a taboo among Hos about women touching a plough. Men also contribute to harvesting, carrying paddy bundles from field to *khalibaan*,<sup>12</sup> threshing and storing grains that further requires communally shared labor contributions, termed as *denga-depenga* among Hos.

Like agriculture, work at the mine was gender-segregated: men broke bigger stones with hammers and chisels in the quarry, while women carried the rubble on their heads overground and filled in a rectangular 6-by-10-foot box. Even though wage earners at the mining site received much higher rates than agricultural wages—almost four times higher at around 25 rupees—the gender-based wage gap remained intact. The wage rate was set at a ratio of 6:4, men paid the total wage of a day which was then divided for women. Still, the wage received at the mining site was significantly higher for both men and women compared to what they received for agricultural work. When I asked the village Munda (village headman) why there was such a gap in the wages of mine work and agriculture, he responded:

Mine work was given by the government and mining company, that is why the wage was higher. Also you can earn more money from there [the mine] and use that money to hire laborers for weeding of your paddy. See, any work that is from government, whether it is NREGA, or construction of roads, culverts, whether it is a man or woman they would get higher wage. But if we increase our (agricultural) rate then we will drown. The money has to be paid not by the government but from our household earnings. If we start paying more, then we will be done. Doing paddy cultivation will be impossible. You get around ten quintals from a field, if you end up spending five to ten thousand rupees then what is point for growing it.

The availability of mine work brought some relief to the villagers, including Kita Bari, in terms of a steady source of wage income, but it also put a tremendous strain on women's workload and physical well-being. One of the respondents, Madeh Bari, recalled, "It was tiring, but I still worked. I did not want to but had to work. Next day, I wouldn't feel like getting off bed in the morning. I wish I did not do it but had also to run the household, take care of kids." Most of the women whom I interviewed mentioned experiencing chronic body ache developed from

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<sup>12</sup> A patch of ground cleared, cleaned, and levelled for threshing and winnowing the paddy harvest.

carrying heavy loads of baskets filled with limestone. Moreover, they had to finish the household chores early in the morning before they left to work at the mine. Jano Bari, recalling her own arduous daily routine, pointed out:

It [mine work] was very tiring work. *Kowatanko* (men) used to break stones and *knitanko* (women) used to carry that on our heads overground from the quarry. They used to pay us for our work. We used to work from Wednesday to Monday, and on Tuesday we had off. The basket we carried stones in used to be so big back then. We were always concerned about our earnings. The more work you do the more money you make. We so desperately used to wait for Mondays, the day we used to get our weekly payments. But while working at the mine our minds would also remain occupied with household chores waiting for us at home. I used to get up early in the morning and cooked food. I also fetched water in *chatu*<sup>13</sup> from the handpump. And after a daylong work of carrying stones on our heads, we had household chores waiting for us to be completed in the evening—cooking dinner, fetching water, sweeping house and courtyards, while also taking care of the kids. Sometimes the kids would cook in the evening when I would be too tired.

Jano Bari had to take on the sole responsibility of not just the household, but most importantly the agricultural work— crucial to ensuring food security and maintaining social and kinship bonds within the community. The earnings from the mine also proved to be crucial for Jano Bari; they not only helped her take care of household expenses but also covered the input cost of agricultural work. She used to stop work in the mine during the sowing season, and then for weeding, ploughing, and leveling the paddy fields, she hired laborers. She could not have completed all the necessary agricultural work through hired labor without the *denga-depenga system* that complimented most of the labor required for paddy cultivation. Recollecting those days Jano pointed out, “I did not have much money, but in those days, people helped each other (*denga-depenga*) so well. In return of *depenga* (work), I offered *dieng* (homemade rice beer), we did not pay any money.”

All work, whether agricultural or non-agricultural, is sourced through two kinds of labor in the village: one based on daily wage work and the other from *denga-depenga*.

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<sup>13</sup> An earthen or aluminum pitcher, weighing around 10-15 lb. in weight with water, is carried by women on their heads from the hand pump to their houses, sometimes more than a mile away, for household needs including drinking, cooking and washing.

The informal *denga-depenga* system consists of free labor within the community whenever it is required, and rather than wages, people laboring in the system receive rice beer and at times midday meals. A similar system exists in many tribal communities, such as the *baddī caddī* form of *bartan* social relatedness among Gaddis which can sometimes transcend internal caste stratifications (Christopher 2020). The household or family in need of the free labor at one time is obligated to return it by offering their free labor to the contributing party at another time. The exchange of such free labor is shaped by closely-knit intra- and inter-clan networks and at times partially dependent upon inter-familial and personal bonding and proximity carried forward from one generation to another. As mining continued, the traditional arrangement of low wage rates and *denga-depenga* in agriculture did not succumb to the relatively high remunerative wages people received at the mining site. In fact, all the three modes of labor—*denga depenga*, village-determined wage rates for unskilled agricultural or non-agricultural work and mine-based wage labor—coexisted.

If we follow a Marxian or neo-classical lens to understand commodity, in this case labor as the commodity, then the co-existence of three kinds of labor valuation—mining work, *denga-depenga*, and village-determined daily wage work—looks absurd. Following Marx, a commodity should carry a universal use-value, but what we find here is the coexistence of three kinds of use-value: 1) use-value solely derived from the capitalist mode of production, 2) use-value based on the economic efficiency of subsistence agriculture and 3) use-value culturally determined and embedded in economic activities with long-term material implications for the community. If we determine commoditization based on an absolute use-value resulting from a deterministic measure of demand, supply, or scarcity, then how can one justify the lower wages paid for agricultural work despite overall larger labor participation in it compared to the mine work?<sup>14</sup> The only way to make that justification would be to embrace the colonial ideology of ‘tribal economy and society’ (Corbridge 1988: 6-14). The colonial archives are full of references that render the Hos incapable of dealing with money as they lacked economic logic and rationality<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The mining operation was brought to its minimum activity during the sowing and harvesting seasons, as people prioritized paddy cultivation over wage work in the mine.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, a British Officer stationed in West Singhbhum district characterized the Ho community in following terms while preparing a land settlement report in the year 1913, “the Ho as a rule is too lazy and improvident to lay money by. He uses up a large proportion of his rice in making his national drink, rice beer, which he calls diang or illi, and as long as he has enough to

Further, seen from a ‘moral economy’ perspective as defined by Scott (1976: 6-7), where subsistence is defined as an inviolable moral principle, the small farmers in Kainuwa should be bound by a subsistence-based logic that lies at the heart of peasant rationality. If so, they would have resisted a capitalist enterprise, one that introduced a capitalist wage system in the village to the detriment of communitarian labor sharing. By contrast, following Samuel Popkin (1979), farmers adhering to a more individualist logic of self-interest maximization would have negotiated with the state and mining company. The people of Kainuwa would then have pursued individual economic interests and opportunities brought forth by the mining operation in the village that would harm the tradition of communitarian labor-sharing and subsistence agriculture. However, the villagers neither outrightly opposed the mine nor abandoned their communitarian labor-sharing practice or subsistence agricultural work.

### **Changing Ideas of Labor in Kainuwa**

Contrary to the popular belief that explains this behavior around the value of labor as irrational and attributing it to tribal economic backwardness and isolation, the integration of the tribal economy into the larger capitalist system goes back to colonial times. The colonial terms of such unequal integration enforced both—maintaining as well as restructuring or dismantling traditional systems of production—because of the colonial state’s immediate needs and requirements to facilitate optimum resource exploitation (Sundar 1997); however, as succinctly pointed out by Povinelli (1993: 5), the tribal economic response is “neither an enclave of subsistence production nor a peripheral outpost of capital penetration”, but rather “[i]t is part of an ongoing production of the group—its economic, cultural, and political well-being—drawn from the multiplicity of cultural and political-economic discourses and resources that Aboriginal people find in their lives”. Rather than lying outside of ‘economic modernity’, the Ho community creatively engages at once with both traditional economic systems and practices as well as the extractive industrial work regime of the modern capitalist system. Far from being trapped into some timeless ‘primitivity’, Corbridge (2004: 49) concludes in his research on small farmers in the Chotanagpur region, “commercialization and commercial attitudes are at least as evident amongst the tribal as in the non-tribal communities”, despite the difficult dry-land farming

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eat and drink, he will not exert himself to improve his condition. Whether he has enough or not, he remains cheerful (10)”

system (also see Corbridge 1982, 1988 and Wanmali 1981). Similar processes of commercialization are evident in, for example, the transformation of Gaddi pastoralism from a central vocation to a discursive mode of representation for appealing to the state and jockeying in the marketplace of ethno-commodification (Christopher and Phillimore 2023).

Appadurai (1988), in the introduction to the edited volume *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, revisits this Marxian concept of commodity which has been mostly perceived as a pre-given, culture-neutral and non-analytical category especially in the context of pre-modern or non-capitalist societies. Appadurai cites George Simmel to bring forth a completely different reading of commodity, one inflected by cultural specificity. According to Simmel (1978), the value of an object is never an inherent or pre-given property but is rooted in judgments made by subjects or people, an idea which resonates with what Marx said about the use-value in commodities in the context of modern capitalist societies. However, Simmel further argues that “the key to the comprehension of value lies in a region where that subjectivity is only provisional and actually not very essential” (Ibid: 73). This is the key point where he significantly deviates from Marx. What Simmel argues is that the value of a commodity is contingent upon specific social, historical, and political contexts. Appadurai’s approach is helpful as it attends to the social and cultural contexts; however, the emphasis is on the history of an individual object (and thus its changing exchangeability) as it moves back and forth through different ‘regimes of values’ (1988: 14), where “exchanges are simply about things and have nothing to do with making, maintaining, or severing social relationships” (Graeber 2001: 32).

Bourdieu, in his ethnographic study of the Kabyle of Algeria (1977) argues that even in non-capitalist societies, where transactions of goods and services are not governed by self-regulating markets but dominated by an overt morality, people still make self-interested calculations. According to Bourdieu, in Kabyle society there are two forms of capital: economic and symbolic. When people pursue symbolic capital, it appears economically irrational only because the values they are maximizing are not material. “Practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness by departing from the logic of interested calculation (in the narrow sense) and playing for stakes that are non-material and not easily quantified” (Bourdieu 1977:177). Thus, for Bourdieu, all activities in a traditional society are economizing in nature and motivated by self-interest but presented in the guise of symbolic capital. In

Kainuwa, it is difficult to examine villagers' participation in communitarian labor sharing and community-based wage labor only based on economizing and the self-interested intentions. People's participation in *denga-depenga* and village-based wage labor neither elevates their social status nor builds symbolic capital. Rather, *denga-depenga* is purely transactional based upon kinship and familial ties and long-term relationships, while participation in low paid wage labor within the village in subsistence paddy cultivation is facilitated to sustain the village economy.

Moving beyond the dualism of cultural or symbolic vis a vis economic, Strathern (1988), in her ethnographic research in Mount Hagen, finds that 'value' is the meaning or importance society ascribes to an object. More importantly, within Marxism value is determined by the individual labor that goes into producing an object; however, for people in Mount Hagen, objects are not ascribed to individual production but are seen as products of social relationships. Strathern notes that work in the Marxist notion of alienation

has a value in the first instance for the self . . . It is the person's own appropriation of his or her activity that gives it value, in so far as the person is a microcosm of the 'social' process by which exogenous appropriation by others, by 'the system,' also gives it value (1988:142–43).

In Mount Hagen, women perform the larger share of work required in caring for and feeding pigs, but pigs are neither individually owned by women nor valued in terms of the social labor invested by women in their production. Rather, value and ownership emerge from social relations in Mount Hagen, where men have the monopoly over the economic transaction involving pigs and women are seen as the producers (A. Strathern 1979: 530-31, 536; also see M. Strathern 1972). Synthesizing Strathern's framing of value based on a web of social relationships and Munn's (1977, 1983, 1986) notion of value born out of human activity/action/transformational potential, Graeber treats value as "the way actions become meaningful to the actors by being placed in some larger social whole, real or imaginary" (2001: 254).

When I asked Mukta Bari if, once the mine closed, she feared a major part of her income would be lost and whether she could meet household expenses, she replied, "No, we had paddy at home which we grow in our fields; we rely on that." I followed up by asking about the lower wages for women in the village. She paused for a moment and responded,

They may raise it if they wish, but it will also significantly increase the expenses of doing paddy cultivation. Maybe if they pay, they would not be able to pay for all the work. How will people get their paddy seeds sown in the field? You also must get the fields weeded regularly before harvesting and carrying it to the Khalihaan. We've got to keep the village in mind while deciding these things.

Women like Niti Gop, Madeh, Jano Kita and Mukta Bari—all either widowed, deserted by their husbands or single—take on sole responsibility to care for their families and households, and most importantly, the agricultural work, crucial to ensuring food security and maintaining social and kinship bonds within the community. These women recognize the injustice behind their low agricultural wages as determined by the village council; however, they cannot assess the labor invested in paddy cultivation on the same par as the labor invested in mining work—the former is permanent, relatively stable and ensures food security for the family and community, whereas the latter is short-lived, inconsistent, and unreliable. Though they are aware of the sacrifices they make in differentially valuing their labor for agricultural work, at the same time they understand the long term return it provides in assuring livelihood, subsistence, food security and community, a phenomenon that became acutely obvious to an outsider during the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in economic shutdown and the sudden loss of wage labor both locally and from out-migration (Sharma 2022).

Andrew Strathern notes in his study of Mount Hagen society that:

It is true that in Melpa ideology men are the controllers and apportioners of land, and women who work on their husbands' land cannot therefore claim its products; but there is a countervailing, and equally significant idea that a person has a claim over what he or she plants, looks after, or harvests, and in the case of vegetables women fully exercise such claims (1979: 538).

In the context of Ho adivasis in Jharkhand, Hebbar argues that the disproportionate contribution of Ho women towards agricultural, household and care-giving tasks, even without possessing formal land rights, must be seen as their “capacity to build a home through their hard work and that alone provides her with a sense of self-worth and respect” (2005: 31). As per the customary law in inheritance, Ho women can neither inherit land nor claim its ownership and can only have a nominal usufructuary right to own a small share of the total family land as a widow or as a single, unmarried woman for their maintenance. The notion of



home for Ho women is always held in impermanence and uncertainty, always contingent upon her marital status and motherhood (only her son can inherit her husband's land as daughters are either married off or will receive only a small share of land as usufructuary right that will eventually be claimed by husband's closest agnates). The disproportionate contribution by women in maintaining and sustaining their house and agricultural work, apart from securing food security for the village community, also instills a sense of self-worth, respect and belongingness to a place and a community.

### **Conclusion**

The British deployed a Eurocentric conception informed by social evolutionism to define the tribal communities as 'primitive'. In Independent India, politicians, scholars, and administrators, by and large, embraced the Western epistemology to build a foundation of the nation that unquestionably inherited all the legal, political, and administrative categories from the colonial regime. The conception of 'tribal economy' as inherently backward and that defined tribal individuals as lacking economic logic and rationality is one among many other similar epistemological acts of violence committed against the tribal communities. Here, I have revisited such epistemic violence by highlighting the application of labor concepts conceived and conceptualized in the West and especially Marxism as inadequate in fully comprehending the labor dynamics among Ho tribes. The unproblematized application of universal categories that have their origin in the Western epistemology continue to enforce colonial tropes of primitivity, backwardness and savagery. As these tropes are retained, recycled, and perpetuated, they shape the mainstream discourse. Only by revisiting these analytical categories with our eyes trained on their 19<sup>th</sup>-century biases and acknowledging the indigenous points of view, the economic and cultural context of the 'illogical' and 'primitive' can be reoriented as making 'logical', purposeful decisions.

Taking a closer look at the dynamic interaction of capitalist systems of production with a traditional livelihood-based village economy leads us to realize that reducing such interaction to the binary of 'exploitation vs resistance' runs the risk of falling into the colonial trope of 'modernity' and 'development' vs tribal 'backwardness' and 'primitivity'. Mining does not solely function as an autonomous site for the capitalist mode of production, independent of cultural variations. Its operation is not solely dictated by a standardized industrial code and a universal conception of

wage labor. On the contrary, it latches onto (among other factors) the gendered division of labor and gendered wage gap existing in the community, enabling more severe forms of labor exploitation to augment its profit maximization. For the local community, specifically women, the arduous work in the mine makes life harder, but the co-existence of mine work and availability of a steady source of wage income enables them to sustain paddy cultivation, which critically instils a sense of community while also ensuring food security.

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