

# India: How To Colonize Your Own Country

Tuesday 24 November 2020, by [MUKERJEE Madhushree](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2015).

**Adivasi society is being destroyed by the classic tools of colonial development, and it is all being done in the name of its fellow Indians.**

"Yet another horrific gang rape has grabbed headlines in India," began an editorial in The New York Times on February 1, 2014. "This time, a village council in the Indian state of West Bengal ordered the rapes as punishment. The crime: falling in love and planning to marry." The editorial, which demanded a crackdown on such "brazen affronts to the rule of law," followed upon a great many similar stories that exploded in national and international media last January.

Sample some of the headlines: "12 gang-rape tribal woman on kangaroo court order in West Bengal's Birbhum district" (Hindustan Times), "Gang Rape Reveals Vigilante India in Rural Villages" (Bloomberg), "Gang Rape Ordered by Indian Village Elders" (Sky News), "West Bengal gang rape: Young woman attacked on bamboo platform in front of entire village" (The Independent), or even "Indian woman gang raped by entire village" (Beiruting.com). These salacious media reports led to calls, including by West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, to outlaw tribal and village councils - whose 'primitive' mores were universally held responsible for the atrocity.

The catch: key elements in these reports are probably false. So many loose statements have been made about this case, including by the police, that media reports have varied widely. There are many different versions of the facts floating around, including such basic things as the date of the alleged rape. There is strong indication that Balai Mardi, the majhi or Santal village chief, was not even in the village that night. Most significantly, the available evidence questions the central charge that someone issued an order to rape Bimala (not her real name) of Subalpur village in Birbhum district, West Bengal.

The proliferation of conflicting testimonies on what happened that night suggests that the full picture may never emerge. Looking at them all, though, this writer believes that Bimala likely was raped that night, but without a council order behind it. Beyond that, the facts that can be discerned provide a disturbing illustration of how the conflict between tradition and modernity is playing out in India's tribal areas - and how misleadingly it is being interpreted. NYT, for instance, featured not only an uncomprehending editorial but also an article on this particular gang rape - although the media usually does not deem newsworthy the sexual assaults on hundreds of Adivasi, or indigenous, women by security forces and allied militias in central India.

The Birbhum event made such a splash precisely because of the alleged involvement of a "kangaroo court" - which spoke to the backwardness of Indian villages and thereby to the urgency of pressing forward with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century civilizing mission of development. "India's rapid modernization has given young women enhanced opportunities and freedoms," explained the NYT editorial, "which these self-appointed guardians of patriarchal tradition view as a grave threat."

Given the delays in West Bengal's courts, the case could take months or years to be resolved; meanwhile all the 13 accused, including the elderly majhi, remain in prison. "The entire case was

twisted by politicians to malign our community,” despairs Nityananda Hembrom, dishom-majhi or Supreme Chief of India’s Santals and head of the Bharat Jakat Majhi Mandua (BJMM), an association of Santal chiefs. “I don’t know how to clear our name.”

Close observers testify that it is scarcely the empowerment of women, but the ravaging of Adivasi society by what passes for development in remote corners of India – in particular, the rapes, prostitution, and trafficking that are endemic to mining areas – that lies behind the frightening increase in sexual aggression within these communities. “When a society is under attack it begins to attack itself, takes it out on the women,” observes anthropologist Felix Padel. “The impact of modernity, mining, media, politics, and violent conflict has been devastating.” Far from egging on such assaults, it is the traditional Adivasi systems of governance that have been striving to hold back the tide of sexual and other violence that is shredding tribal communities in contemporary India.

\* \* \*

Bimala is under police protection and no longer in Subalpur. Meanwhile, there are at least three versions of the Birbhum rape narrative. According to the primary one, on January 22, 2014, a police station near Bolpur, Birbhum, registered a First Information Report (FIR) written in Bengali and bearing the thumbprint of Bimala, a Santal woman of Subalpur village.

According to the FIR, 20-year-old Bimala was engaged to be married to one Sheikh Khalek, a non-Santal who worked in construction as a mason and who had come to visit her at 5pm on Monday, January 20. That evening, Santal villagers led by their majhi, Balai Mardi, seized the pair, tied them up and tried them for the offence of planning to marry outside their jati (which can mean tribe, caste, or race). The pair was fined Rs 27,000 – a sum they could not afford to pay. Accordingly, Mardi ordered the village men: “Enjoy yourselves with her, do whatever you want.” Mardi himself, along with 12 others, raped Bimala that night. The next morning the pair was allowed to leave, with the warning that if they went to the police, Bimala’s house would be burned down. So it was not until the following Wednesday that she found the courage to approach the authorities.

This was the story that, with minor variations, came to be reported around the world. Subalpur’s other Santal women, though, offer a very different version of events. To begin with, they claim to have taken the initiative in apprehending Bimala with her employer and lover Khalek, a man they say was already married with two children. “We don’t allow men from another jati to enter our homes,” states Mallika Tudu defiantly. When the women saw the visitor arrive that evening, she continues, “We told the village mothers that the Mussulman has come, and we fetched the men.”

The villagers broke into Bimala’s hut, where the lovers were lying on the bed, dragged them out and tied them to a date palm tree in front of the majhi’s house. The majhi was away attending a wedding in a different village, so the villagers waited for him to return the next morning to try the pair. “We wanted the man to marry her and take her away from our village,” says Tudu. (Although Khalek is in fact married, the women seem to have been counting on the fact that Indian Muslims can legally have more than one wife.) “We guarded them the whole night, all of us together. Nothing happened, there was no rape,” says Tudu. The villagers seem to have been consistent in their version except for this one thing – right after the news first broke, they told one investigator that they had failed to guard Bimala for two hours that night. But later they retracted this and now claim that she was guarded the whole night.

To continue with the villagers’ version: the next morning, a Tuesday, the majhi arrived. So, however, did members of the elected village council, or panchayat– all Bengalis, that is, non-Adivasis, and all belonging to the Trinamool Party – as well as Khalek’s relatives. (In Birbhum, many villages have a Santal hamlet and an adjacent Bengali hamlet; individuals from the latter typically control the

village panchayat. Moreover, because this elected body disburses developmental funds such as those from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and others, its officials wield far more authority than the Santal majhis, who are typically impoverished.) The panchayat members took over the proceedings and brokered a deal. With Khalek refusing to marry Bimala, he was fined Rs 25,000, which his brother handed over to be given to the Santals. Bimala did not have the Rs 3,000 that she was ordered to pay, but her elder brother, who lives in another village, undertook to hand over the sum. "We did not do the settlement, nor did we ask for money," Tudu insists; it was the Bengalis who offered money in lieu of Khalek not having to marry Bimala. The captives were then freed that afternoon.

As far as Subalpur's women knew, that was the end of the matter until the day after, Wednesday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, when the police arrived and arrested five men. When the remaining villagers went to the police station to inquire, the police called up eight more men and arrested them. The notorious Trinamool MLA Manirul Islam, who is allegedly involved in a triple murder case, was presiding over the proceedings that day, say the women. "We showed him the paper [we had]," they say. This handwritten statement, a copy of which this writer has seen, attests to the settlement of a dispute regarding an illicit sexual encounter between Bimala and Khalek. Signed by two Trinamool panchayat members, as well as Khalek and his brother, it indicates that the "trial" was held on Tuesday morning – in contradiction to the FIR. "Manirul replied, 'It has no value. If you try to be smart, none of your heads will remain on your bodies,'" says Tudu.

A BJMM representative who has also been investigating this case offers yet another perspective. In this version, Bimala had eloped a few years earlier with a Santal man from Jharkhand, who instead of marrying her had trafficked her to Delhi. She'd eventually been rescued through the efforts of a relative of her Santal abductor (who was mortified at his kinsman's conduct), and had returned to Subalpur in the previous monsoon (2013). Although Bimala started working in construction as Khalek's employee, the village women came to suspect that she was also involved in sex work – with their own husbands and sons among her customers. So they'd resolved to rid themselves of her presence by forcing her to marry an outsider, namely Khalek. The majhi was indeed absent on the night of January 20, says the BJMM representative, and Subalpur's Santal villagers had indeed guarded the captives for most of that night as they claimed. However, he adds, some of the Santal men who held Bimala captive had started drinking alcohol later that night and had sent the women away for at least two hours. Bimala may well have been raped during that time.

Of the 13 men arrested, one, Debraj Mondal, is a Bengali and the rest are Santal. (An ambiguous figure, Mondal appears to have been both protector and exploiter of Subalpur's Santals. He helped the Adivasis get medical care at government hospitals and spoke up for them when the panchayat failed to pay for MGNREGA work; but he is also alleged to have illegally supplied alcohol to the villagers.) The police say they have a camera on which Mondal took two intimate pictures of Bimala: one with Khalek, and the other with a man whose face is obscured but who Mondal identified as one of the arrested Santals, Sunil Kisku. According to the Kolkata-based Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), whose members interviewed Bimala and others, Kisku also stands accused of having committed an earlier rape in the same village. The preliminary medical report on Bimala indicates several scratches and other injuries on her face and body but does not conclusively state whether rape occurred or not. The police have been claiming rape to the media but are yet to submit the required forensic report with DNA and other evidence that might help identify the rapists. The APDR has also not presented a formal report yet.

Also according to the BJMM, Khalek is related to Manirul Islam. The MLA made national news last year when he publicly threatened to behead a Congress rival, and in Birbhum he is commonly believed to have committed three murders. (It's relevant here to note that Islam had earlier admitted to these murders but has since retracted his confession; his name has been dropped from the

chargesheet, prompting allegations that the West Bengal government is protecting him.) When he heard of his relative's predicament, Islam allegedly instructed the Trinamool panchayat men to extricate Khalek from the threatened marriage by paying off the Santals, after which he would "take care" of them. That might explain the sensational FIR implicating the majhi as well.

"For the majhi system [of governance] to pronounce rape as a punishment is absolutely unheard of," comments Ruby Hembrom, who runs an indigenous publishing house, Adivaani, in Kolkata. Nor is such a verdict sanctioned by customary Santal law. Several witnesses from Sreekrishnapur, about 5km away from Subalpur, are willing to testify, moreover, that on the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> the majhi was staying over in their village. The medical report on the arrested men also seems to exonerate him, for it indicates that he may not be capable of sexual intercourse - contrary to the explicit description provided in Bimala's sworn testimony.

\* \* \*

Although this story is exceptionally public, it does not appear to be the most brutal such assault to have occurred recently among Birbhum's Santals. According to the BJMM, in February last year several Santal youths of Rajnagar village near Siuri abducted, raped and hanged from a tree a 13-year-old Santal girl from their own village. The gang so terrorized her family members for the next few days that they could not leave the village to register an FIR until members of the BJMM arrived and escorted them to the police station. "But nothing came of it," says social worker Ghasiram Hembrom of the BJMM: the police, allegedly because of pressure from the village's Trinamool panchayat, submitted a report of suicide and closed the case. The girl's family has since left the village altogether for fear of the thugs, Hembrom adds.

Although in the past Santals may have committed rapes, never before have so many young men turned with such concerted ferocity upon their women. The tragedy is all the more acute, comments Felix Padel, when one recalls that traditional Adivasi culture "is extremely sophisticated in its handling of romance and love." Santals were once celebrated for their love songs, their exceptional skill in playing the flute, and their erotic moonlight dances - reminiscent of krishnalila, or Krishna's love play. Ethnologist Edward T Dalton wrote lyrically in 1872 that every Santal village featured an open space, to which "the young men frequently resort after their evening meal, and the sound of their flutes and drums soon attract the maidens, who smooth and adjust their long hair, and adding to it a flower or two, blithely join them." After the dance, a man and woman who fancy each other might vanish into the forest.

Xavier Dias, editor of Khan Khaneej aur Adhikaar, a newsletter on mining and human rights published out of Jharkhand, says that among Adivasis "you wouldn't see cases of sex without romance. Sexuality in tribal culture is not restricted to genital contact. In Ho they say, 'I went to the market and I spoke to a girl. That was very exciting.' It's so different from the culture I grew up in Bombay or Bangalore, where if you refer to a girl you speak of her anatomy or her sex appeal."

To this day, Adivasis boast greater equality between men and women than mainstream Indians, as evinced by a 2011 census finding that scheduled tribes have the best gender ratio in India: 990 women for every 1000 men. (Because of female foeticide and neglect of girls, especially in more 'developed' states such as Punjab and Haryana, India as a whole has only 943 women to 1000 men.) Indeed, out of 58 tribes surveyed, 27 had more women than men. Among the tribes, however, the gender ratio for children aged six years or younger is lower than for adults. This worrisome development, which indicates an increased preference for boys, may result from the fact that the mainstream practice of dowry, which turns girls into an economic liability, appears to be slowly replacing the tradition of bride price among Santals and several other tribes. And although the more "advanced" or settled tribes, such as the Santals, have patriarchal political structures and some

abusive practices such as witch hunts, nomadic tribes such as the Bonda of Odisha or the Jarawa of the Andaman Islands treat men and women as more or less equal. Rapes by men from these allegedly “primitive” communities are virtually unknown.

Rahul Banerjee, a social worker with Bhil tribes in Alirajpur district of Madhya Pradesh, attributes an apparent increase in gender-related violence in this community to the ingress of consumer culture. Adivasi men who want to buy televisions or expensive mobile phones are migrating to Gujarat and other wealthy states, he says, and often return with large quantities of cash savings. As a result, property values in Alirajpur have shot up, fuelling an unexpected increase in witch-hunts – typically, a woman who owns assets that her relatives covet is targeted and killed for being a ‘witch’. A few of these newly wealthy men have also raped women and gotten away with the crime by paying the panchayat a fine. “Earlier, there used to be community control over behaviour” via the traditional tribal councils, says Banerjee. Now, with the elected and usually venal panchayat leaders taking all the key decisions, “you can buy your way out.”

Another pernicious influence, that Banerjee and virtually every other close observer of rural India points to, is the spread of pornography, some of it violent, by mobile phones. Dias says that porn arrived in Jharkhand in the early 1990s with the VCR. Village youths would buy a TV, rent a generator, and show movies, including “blue” films, for a small fee such as a fistful of rice. Now every small town and most villages in tribal India boast kiosks that service mobile phones and, for a fee, download pornographic video clips onto phones’ memory chips. These are then passed around. Many men are also making and circulating their own pornographic clips without the knowledge or consent of the women involved. Saadi Murmu, a Santal schoolteacher in Garia in Birbhum, says she has seen boys as young as ten watching such films.

Picturing the sex act as a pounding of body parts – bereft of romance or even a story line – pornographic films depict women as objects to be used by men. What is more, Dias finds that many Adivasi youth believe the loveless encounters they view in these films to be the norm in the diku (non-Adivasi) society to which they aspire. “Here, your whole concept of the real world is the diku world,” Dias explains. An Adivasi youth watching porn comes to believe that “this is what dikus do. This is how dikus have sex, so this probably is the right way to have sex.” Adivasi men may in fact be particularly vulnerable, says anthropologist Sita Venkateswar of Massey University in New Zealand, to imbibing “the forms of masculinity that are rendered visible and validated through these films – because their existing sense of self and forms of being are under attack.” Test studies have shown that the brutal genre called “rape porn”, in particular, tends to validate rape in the minds of men who may already be inclined to commit the crime.

The primary source of sexual aggression in Adivasi society is, however, the overt violence being visited upon it by mainstream society. Adivasi culture in West Bengal’s Birbhum started to disintegrate with the advent of stone quarries in the 1970s, says social worker Kunal Deb, who runs an NGO based near Siuri. As the industry encroached, ravaging fields, crops and streams with boulders and dust, agriculture became increasingly unviable. Santals either sold their land and fled the area or started working as labourers in the quarries and crushers (which break boulders into stone chips). There, the women were routinely raped by footloose migrants attracted by the thousands to the area by the lucrative mining industry, working as quarry owners, managers, overseers as well as truck drivers and their lackeys.

In the early 1990s, recalls Santal schoolteacher Baburji Kisku of Garia village, an abandoned quarry near Siuri had most of its accumulated water pumped out. As the water level receded, it revealed some 10 to 15 sacks near the bottom – each holding the remnants of a human being. No one knew who these victims were but everyone presumed them to be Santals: women who’d been raped and killed by their overseers, men who’d protested the violation of a wife or sister and had also been

slain, or labourers from afar who'd perished in mining accidents and simply been dumped. Because the mine owners – all men from mainstream diku society – openly carried guns and boasted of friends among the police and politicians, no one had dared to demand an investigation into these murders. "Many men told me their own sisters had been raped in front of their eyes, and if they protested they were warned off with a pistol," says Kisku.

Such outrages are not restricted to West Bengal or even India. In tribal areas across the world, mining and other forms of industrialization appear to be inextricably entwined with sexual violence. United Nations Special Rapporteur James Anaya stated in January: "Indigenous women have reported that the influx of workers into indigenous communities as a result of extractive projects [has] led to increased incidents of sexual harassment and violence, including rape and assault." Such violations were contributing to the spread of HIV, he added.

Dias states that when he first arrived in Singbhum (in what is now Jharkhand) in 1974, "the only rapes I heard of were by forest guards. That's how the rape culture started here. And never, never until say about 1985, did I hear of an Adivasi raping someone." As mechanization vastly increased the scale of mining and hitherto untouched areas were opened up, matters deteriorated. "From 2005 onward, some 2,000 trucks started plying daily in the Saranda forest," continues Dias. "Each truck coming in with a driver, a cleaner, and others." As a result, he says, thousands of Munda, Santal, and Ho women in these tribal areas were raped or forced into prostitution. Such abuse has a storied history, he adds, accounting for the existence of an "Azaad Basti", or Freedom Slum, in each of the state's major steel cities of Jamshedpur and Noamundi. Officials visit their Adivasi mistresses there for virtually free sex – which explains the name, says Dias.

Surya Shankar Dash, a filmmaker based in Odisha, similarly recalls that in the Lanjigarh area, where many Kondh families lived, "sexual violence was almost unheard of" before the arrival of the UK-based mining company Vedanta Resources in 2002. The only earlier rapes he knows of were committed in the 1990s – one by a government anthropologist in charge of the Dongria Kondh Development Agency, and the other by an employee of an NGO operating in Lanjigarh. After Vedanta started building an aluminium refinery, however, "I heard many stories from villagers about the abduction and rape of local girls and women by truckers, migrant workers and Vedanta's contractors and employees," he says. One of those allegedly abducted and abused by Vedanta's "goons," adds Dash, was the 9-year-old daughter of an activist – who fortunately survived. Today, says the filmmaker, Lanjigarh has hundreds of sex workers: women who were dispossessed when their villages were forcibly relocated for the refinery, or those who were raped or seduced and then abandoned by the migrants.

Dash goes on to recite a relentless list. "More than a thousand Adivasi prostitutes in Damanjodi, the township for the NALCO refinery in Koraput. A captive Birhor community in Sukinda's chromite mines where all the women and even teenagers have been forced to prostitute themselves to truck drivers and contractors. Displaced girls in Kalinga Nagar's transit camps being sexually abused by Tata's goons. A prostitute slum is emerging in front of Jindal's factory in Kalinga Nagar."

Also according to Dash, in an isolated Paroja community in Koraput district – whose land was submerged upon construction of the Kolab reservoir in the 1980s, rendering it unable to provide for itself – officials from the district administration threatened to withhold legally mandated rations from the villagers unless they were given free access to the traditional girls' dormitory. Their objective was to obtain sex. These dormitories, where the older girls of a village sleep in the same community hall (boys have their own separate dormitory), are common among tribes that live by hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation, and impart to the tribe's future adults "a very subtle form of socialization," explains an anthropologist who asked not to be named. There these adolescents learn from their slightly elder peers how to compose songs, dance, raise crops, use

herbs for medicinal purposes (including, eventually, contraception), craft combs and other gifts to give to romantic partners, as well as, says the anthropologist, "the whole care with which you go beyond that - when you sleep with someone and when you don't." Each dormitory also hosts unmarried visitors of the opposite sex when they arrive from another village for festivities. These occasions, which are important for reinforcing solidarity within the tribe, usually lead to romantic and sexual encounters that the tribesmen and women regard as a healthy prelude to marriage.

Diku men who are posted to these remote regions, however, tend to see the dormitories as locations of unbridled licentiousness, so that they frequently invade these spaces in search of sex. As a result, many tribes have been forced to shut their dormitories down, depriving their youngsters of an education in the culture of the tribe, including the arts of romance. In this particular case, the Paroja village also closed its dormitory rather than give access to it to the district officials, but it is nonetheless still required to provide sex to the officials in lieu of provisions.

Just as troubling, in 2008 Mahammad Ashlam of KBK Samachar, a video collective in Odisha, reported that young Adivasi men and women were singing and dancing at a traditional gathering in Kalahandi district when traffickers in jeeps invaded and dragged the women away. This is not an isolated instance. Last year, Lily Kujur of Adivasi Mahila Suraksha Mandal in Rourkela, Odisha, informed CGNet Swara, a mobile reporting service, that more than 40,000 Adivasi women have been trafficked out of just one Odisha district, Sundergarh, of whom 15,000 have vanished without trace.

According to activist Gladson Dungdung of Jharkhand, Delhi alone has almost half a million Adivasi girls and women, mainly working as domestic servants in homes but also as prostitutes. Brokers from placement agencies roam tribal villages, especially those where agricultural livelihoods have been damaged by mining, luring women with false promises of jobs in the city. Dungdung charges that these agencies also organize auctions during the Adivasi festivals of Sarhul and Karam, selling women to other brokers or directly to prospective employers. Many of the trafficked women are sexually abused, some are killed, and others return with a child in tow - only to be rejected by their home communities. Many vanish without a trace. "When I go back to my home village" in Simdega district, says Dungdung, "I hardly see any girls. They're all gone."

If anything, matters are even worse in Chhattisgarh, where the destructive impact of mining and displacement has been compounded by the violent conflict between government forces and Maoist guerrillas. Starting around 2005, the Central Reserve Police Force and the state-sponsored tribal militia Salwa Judum forced some 50,000 Adivasis into camps in order to cut off any contact with the Maoists. Another lakh fled into Andhra Pradesh, estimates anthropologist Nandini Sundar of Delhi University. These state's representatives "were killing people, raping women as and when they caught them, and using girls from the camps as sex slaves," says Sundar. Twenty-two CRPF outposts now ring the Raoghat mining area in north Bastar - in order to deter protests against mining, explains Sundar - and in parts of Dantewada such camps can be found every 5km. These security centres are usually located on school premises, and with men roaming unhindered many girls are too terrified to attend anymore. Few dare to venture into the forest either for fear of encountering police or soldiers there.

Tehelka magazine recently reported that although official figures say 9,000 Adivasi women have been trafficked from Chhattisgarh in the past decade, activists believe the figure to be 10 times that. Advocate Sudha Bharadwaj noted last year that the state had yet to register a single FIR for 99 rapes allegedly conducted by the Salwa Judum - despite a 2011 Supreme Court order directing the Chhattisgarh government to act on detailed affidavits regarding them. Such studied tolerance of atrocities committed by the 'keepers of the law' indicates to many observers that the Indian state is now indifferent to the human rights violations arising from its subjugation of Adivasis on behalf of the mining industry.

Half a century ago, anthropologist Verrier Elwin had observed that the ghotul, or the Muria Adivasi dormitory for adolescents celebrated the idea that “youth must be served, that freedom and happiness are more to be treasured than any material gain, that friendliness and sympathy, hospitality and unity are of the first importance, and above all that human love – and its physical expression – is beautiful, clean, and precious.” Almost all of India’s ghotuls have been eradicated by now. Instead, says Dias, as a result of relentless exposure to sexual and other aggression committed by the diku world, Adivasi youth – “a few, maybe, but a dangerous few, are regarding violence as an integral part of sexual relations.”

\* \* \*

Every native yearns to take the place of his colonial master – to sleep in his bed, and if possible with his wife, wrote the French-Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon. Playing the flute and composing poetry are no longer the aspirations of a young Santal man. He seeks, instead, the attributes that diku society attaches to a ‘successful’ male: an air-conditioned Scorpio or, failing that, a motorcycle, jeans, sunglasses, branded cigarettes, foreign alcohol, a fancy mobile phone, and a contemptuous attitude to women. These are all components of the lifestyle affected by owners and managers in the mining industry around him. But a quarry owner may make a million rupees in a day while his labourer earns between one and three hundred per day, and so many Adivasi men satisfy their newfound desire to consume with cheap alcohol.

According to Deb and others, male labourers in Birbhum typically spend a third of their daily wages in the hooch shops that are located by every quarry and in every village. In the past, Santals used to painstakingly brew liquor out of flowers of the mahua tree to drink only on religious occasions. Now, cheap commercial alcohol is available all the time. Many men also claim that work on the quarries is physically so punishing that they need to get drunk at the end of the day. Needless to say, alcoholism lies behind considerable domestic abuse, of which women and children are the primary victims. Moreover, it has reduced the pool of eligible Santal males and thereby increased the attractiveness, to Santal women, of diku suitors.

The resulting loss of access to the tribe’s women is compounding the despair and fury of Santal males. Apart from increasing numbers of genuine “love” marriages between diku men and Adivasi women, many Santal women in Birbhum and Jharkhand are being controlled by outsiders, not so much for sex as for access to land. Practically the entire quarry belt in Birbhum lies on land once owned by Santals – but almost all the quarries are owned by outsiders. Selling tribal land to non-tribals is illegal, so the dikus have assumed ownership either by using a false Santal name or by seducing a Santal woman. The lover either marries the woman or keeps her permanently as a mistress, “after which he can make a quarry on her land or buy land in her name,” says Deb. As Virginius Xaxa of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences notes, such alliances are also common in Jharkhand, where the women involved “are not only seen as aligning with the dikus but also as conduits of land transfer from tribes to non-tribes.”

As a result, young Santal men find that as the quarries advance across the landscape, they are losing their traditional occupations, autonomy, and self-respect – along with their women. And it is the women on whom they are taking out their fury. In recent years, gangs of Santal youth from Birbhum have staged nude parades of three Santal women: one who was found with her Bengali diku lover, and the other two merely on suspicion of having interacted with diku men.

One of the latter victims, Phulmoni (name changed) of Neempahari village, tells her story. In the summer of 2010, she’d gone with two girlfriends to eat jamun fruit in a nearby forest when Santal youths from her own village seized them and charged that they’d been secretly meeting with lovers. The men, who were among the more educated in the community, says Phulmoni, held the three



overnight – warning off the women’s family members and even the majhi when they tried to intervene. According to several villagers in the locale, Robeen Soren, a Santal youth leader who was allegedly in the pay of quarry owners, had earlier issued a diktat to take mobile phones away from young unmarried Santal women, and to punish them if caught with dikus. The captors told Phulmoni’s relatives that Soren had been summoned and would “try” the women.

The next morning Soren had arrived, with a large and threatening retinue of young Santal men on motorcycles. According to Phulmoni and others, Soren tried half-heartedly to restrain his followers, who nonetheless stripped her and a friend (the villagers were able to rescue the third) and dragged them naked all the way to the next village and back. Phulmoni, who remains profoundly traumatized, says that she eventually fainted but remembers the men, who “have no shame,” fondling her private parts. She has since fled the village because of threats by those she’d named to the police; and with pictures of the parade having been circulated via mobile phones, she is too ashamed to seek work anywhere in the area. Instead, Phulmoni survives now by collecting sal leaves from the forest, sewing them into plates, drying them and then selling each for ten paisa. “If there is sun, I eat. If not, I don’t eat,” she says matter-of-factly.

Nude parades have occurred elsewhere, as in 2007 in Guwahati, Assam, when a young Adivasi woman participating in a march for constitutional rights was stripped naked and chased through the city. Never before, however, have they been perpetrated by Santals. The parades in Birbhum appear to be a copycat expression of the young men’s fury toward the women, whom Soren had allegedly branded as traitors to the tribe. Notably, Santal men have no access to Bengali women either – and men with little hope of acquiring a woman of their own are particularly prone to sexual violence. We see this throughout history, as evinced by a startling statistic from the 19<sup>th</sup> century coolie trade. In 1871, an official study found that among indentured labourers from India in Guiana, where only two female coolies were available for every five males, murders motivated by sexual jealousy were 90 times more frequent than in India – and 142 times more frequent than in the two districts from which most of the coolies had hailed. Almost all of those murdered were women.

The coolies had, of course, also undergone violent rupture from their families, communities and traditions. Across all cultures experiencing change, explains Venkateswar, “especially when those who are subject to those changes have no control over them, women become the target of violence and repression because they are the symbols of what needs to be preserved, what is being lost. Women as bearers of progeny are also the source of hope for a future, and their loss therefore also signals a lost future for the community.”

Ironically, National Public Radio in the US also described this nude parade as having been ordered by “village elders.” But in September 2012, more than a hundred majhis from the area assembled in a council to hear testimonies from several Santals who’d suffered this and other abuse at the hands of Soren’s gang. Padel, who has observed smaller councils, says that “these are really the best examples I know of democracy at work...the way everyone is allowed to speak, men and women, and an amazing rhythm between everyone talking at once, and moments when everyone is silent with full attention on one speaker.” The council excommunicated the offenders, including Soren, from the tribe. Now operating under the banner of the BJMM, the Santal majhis have also organized rallies attended by thousands to protest Chief Minister Banerjee’s recent call to outlaw tribal systems of governance in reaction to Bimala’s case in Subalpur. As they see it, restoring the true self-governance that Santals once enjoyed is the only way to defend the culture and integrity of their tribes from the corrosive aspects of modernity, of which sexual violence is but a symptom.

Across the country, besieged Adivasis say that the only hope of slowing the disintegration of their communities is to fight the ingress of the outside world. For the Dongria Kondh of Odisha’s Niyamgiri, the disfigurement of the Adivasi culture in Lanjigarh, at the foot of the mountain, was

reason enough for their collective decisions, taken last year, to stop Vedanta from mining the mountaintop. And as a Dongria man told journalist Amitabh Patra, the government and the company had sent forces who were “beating us up, dragging us by our long hair, trespassing in our houses, attacking our women and girls, insulting our gods by entering our sacred places wearing shoes, and looting our valuables. Is this what educated people do?”

So far as Adivasis across the country can tell, the answer is an emphatic “Yes.”

It pains dishom-majhi Hembrom that many newspapers described what happened in Subalpur as a ‘medieval’ barbarity. Santal culture, he points out, has always accepted certain women’s rights that mainstream society does not yet fully grant. For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformer Iswarchandra Vidyasagar was born into the only Bengali family in a Santal village, where he observed the practice of widow remarriage that he eventually propagated in Hindu society. Vidyasagar never alluded to the source of the idea, says Hembrom, because then as now most dikus looked upon Adivasis as savages, and would therefore have found further ground to reject it. “Whatever happened in Subalpur,” Hembrom concludes, “was not medieval barbarity at all, but a modern barbarity.”

Time and time again, the ways in which an allegedly backward society treats its women has been used to argue for a civilizing mission. The canonical example is sati, which 19<sup>th</sup> century British publications described in lurid and illustrated detail. A century later, British intelligence financed the research that went into *Mother India* (1927), a runaway bestseller book that described Hindu males as paedophiles. Although both these campaigns were based on certain truths, their underlying purpose was not to defend women and girls but to argue for imperial rule. As historians have shown, sati in fact intensified in response to the land laws that the British introduced to facilitate the extraction of taxes: it suddenly became profitable to kill widows for the land they owned. The very cause that aggravated the disease – colonialism – was subsequently hailed as the cure.

Padel and others suspect that the prominent misreporting of the Subalpur affair across national and international media, showcasing the purported barbarity of India’s tribal councils, may have served a similar purpose. What remains of Adivasi resistance in India is blocking tens, possibly hundreds, of billions of dollars of investment in further mining operations. The decision by the Dongria Kondh councils last year jeopardized Vedanta’s \$10 billion investment in the Lanjigarh complex, constructed to refine the ore to be mined from Niyamgiri. Uncritically accepting a narrative of a gang-rape being ordered by such a council – while simultaneously ignoring how Adivasi society is being destroyed wholesale by development – may serve a classic neo-colonial purpose: making the case to ban these gram sabhas that are holding up development and completing the takeover of Adivasi land for diku profit.

---

**Madhusree Mukerjee** is a journalist and the author of ‘Churchill’s Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II’ and ‘The Land of Naked People: Encounters with Stone Age Islanders’. She is also a physicist and has served on the board of editors of ‘Scientific American’ magazine.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

---

**P.S.**

This piece originally appeared on [Grist Media](#)

Rural India Online

<https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/how-to-colonize-your-own-country/>