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Millenarian Dreams, Modern Aspirations:
Tribal Community-Making and Contentious
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Abstract

This paper interrogates the concept of “millenarianism,” which has been employed since the 1970s in South Asia and beyond to read subaltern religious movements in an anti-colonial, even proto-nationalist, light. I demonstrate that this anti-colonial reading of millenarian pasts rests on a secular understanding of subaltern politics that avoids a serious study of socio-religious change. Modern statecraft is treated by such scholars, following Max Weber, as secular, and subalterns are then taken to be an oppositional category in which secularization has not yet occurred. Against such a perspective on subaltern-state relations in modern colonial and postcolonial contexts, this paper deploys a range of oral and archival sources to delineate the relationship between socio-religious change and agrarian transformations, thereby revealing the curious modernity of millenarianism among the Mundas, an adivasi or “tribal” group in the Chotanagpur region of eastern India.

Author

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1. Introduction

The Mundaris are not so truthful as the Hos of Singhbhum, nor do I consider them so manly and honest; but the Mundas have lived for ages under conditions ill-calculated to develop...[these] good qualities... There has been a continuous struggle to maintain what they consider their rights in the land, against the adverse interest of the landlord or his assigns.

Sir W.W. Hunter, Statistical Account: District of Lohardaga (1877)

[B]uilt into the subaltern studies focus on peasant insurgency...was the assumption that the state and forms of governance were external to the immediate social world of peasants.

Partha Chatterjee, "Interview by Manu Goswami" (2013)

The making of the modern tribal subject in India and beyond remains as little understood today as in the nineteenth century. The persistence of primitivism as an ideology lies at the heart of the problem. In the study of tribal resistance and rebellion, scholars commonly use the loosely-defined notion of "millenarianism"¹ to understand how so-called primitive subjects grapple with the modern state. Millenarianism, according to this social science literature, denotes an ideology of protest in which those who have not fully adapted to the demands of modernity fall back on pre-modern "religion" to express their resistance, however unsuccessfully. What is required, however, is a more nuanced understanding of both religion, and the relationship of tribals to forms of modern statecraft.

If we are to move towards a better explanation of why some modern tribal subjects took up arms against the colonial state, we need to examine firstly, their precise social location, and secondly, how their turn to violence related to their involvement in more peaceful forms of activism. In answering these two questions in this paper, I follow Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly in arguing for a "close connection" rather than a "sharp division" between violent and peaceful repertoires of contention². In

1 See, most notably, Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religions Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (London: Heinemann, 1973); Patricia R. Pessar, *From Fanatics to Folk: Brazilian Millenarianism and Popular Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

2 Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century, 1830-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 282.

other words, the logic of tribal social protest, expressed as millenarianism, is sought here in the complementarity between peaceful and violent repertoires of contention in negotiating modern states from below in late-nineteenth-century Chotanagpur. The switch from peaceful to violent forms of contentious politics occurred, I argue, on account of the limitations of non-violent resistance in achieving subaltern political ends. The millenarian dreams that framed mobilization and protest tactics³, far from a kind of obscurantism or turn to the pre-modern past, were critical for galvanizing ordinary tribal subjects in their all-too-modern aspirations for *communitas*. Violence, as Victor Turner noted a generation ago, can foster *communitas* during liminal periods of conflict and uncertainty even as it, ironically, enhances conflict and uncertainty in the process⁴. The ends of such political mobilization were, as this paper shows, ineluctably modern, insofar as both rebels and activists endeavored to soften and remake the modern state from below in disparate colonial contexts.

This paper is divided accordingly into two halves. The first half explores non-violent or peaceful forms of activism during the Sardar Larai of the Mundas in Chotanagpur, c. 1870s and 1880s, and the second half offers a reinterpretation of the *ulgulan* (“rebellion” in Mundari) led by Birsa Munda, c. 1895-1901. My aim here is to demonstrate that the switch from the former to the latter ought to be understood in terms of complementary modes of social protest and mobilization such that timing and sequence matter immensely. Despite certain obvious differences, there are significant overlaps that merit recognition: the catalytic role played, intentionally or not, by Lutheran and Jesuit missionaries in the region; the state-centric nature of different modes of protest; the agrarian context of subaltern claims-making, both peaceful and violent; and, contrary to much academic wisdom on millenarianism, the *successes* of resistance in the margins in achieving certain political ends. These overlaps do not, of course, imply that modern tribal subjects ended their subjecthood altogether at the turn of the nineteenth century. Instead, they renegotiated the terms of their subjecthood vis-à-vis the colonial state and paved the way for a reconstitution of the margins via a rewriting of agrarian laws and land records. Far from seeking to overthrow British colonial rule in the region, therefore, the rebels’ turn to violence, in fact, deepened the process of modern statemaking in the margins.

3 I draw here on the pioneering work on framing and ideology in social mobilization done by David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1, no. 1 (1988).

4 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95-166.

2. The Fruits and Limits of Peaceful Activism in the Margins

[N]o sooner are notices issued inviting Bhuinhars and zemindars to file in their respective claims, than some men who profess to be Christian preachers (whether in the regular employ of the mission or not) go about the country and unsettle people's minds, raising vain hopes about the land question.

*V.T. Taylor, Officiating Commissioner of Chota Nagpore,
20 August 1877*

One of the paradoxes of writing adivasi history today is the recognition that the period in which “tribes” began to be conceived as egalitarian, homogenous units is also the period in which these rural groups became increasingly differentiated internally and in relation to the modern (colonial) state. In this section, I offer a context to understand millenarian social protest by examining the growing political assertiveness of the better-off peasants or *bhuinhars* among the Munda tribe in the Chotanagpur region of eastern India in the later nineteenth century. I intend to show how modern tribal subjects' engagements with the colonial state decisively shaped contestations over land tenure in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur as well as their own political selves. These engagements revolved around a land survey commissioned by E.T. Dalton, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur Division, in 1859. The survey, unique in many ways, intended to “define and record” lands held by *bhuinhars* in Munda and Oraon villages⁵. The initial survey conducted by Lal Lokenath Sahi had to be abandoned after the surveyor's untimely death. But in the eleven years following the passage of the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act (1869), the Bhuinhari Settlement Survey, as it was known, came to define the structure of rural society in Chotanagpur. As rural society came to be increasingly peasantized and stratified over the nineteenth century, the survey and settlement operations from 1869 to 1880 registered the claims of a growing upper peasantry (*bhuinhars*) vis-à-vis their landlords (*zamindars*) and the lower peasantry. Who would be included in the *bhuinhari* survey and what one needed to do to be included are, therefore, central to the story here.

In theory at least, everyone agreed on the definition of a *bhuinhar* until the survey operations ended in 1876-77. In the earliest statement on the *bhuinhari* question, in 1839, Dr. John Davidson had written to Major J.R. Ouseley to indicate that the

5 Captain E.T. Dalton to A.R. Young, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 25 March 1859, PCAD I.

bhuinhars, being “the original clearers...or their descendants” held lands free of any rent obligations in rural Chotanagpur. As “acknowledged fair labour,” however, they were, along with other peasants,

obliged to give the theekedar or land-owner...three days’ ploughing, three days’ work with kori [sickle] or kodal [spade], three days’ work in planting rice and same at cutting it; to bring grass and bamboos and thatch their houses, and occasionally when on a journey to carry their bhangies [luggage].

Noting that many *bhuinhars* who “leave the village” struggle to retain their ancestral lands, Davidson argued that the Commissioner’s office ought to ensure that all *bhuinhars* who had “not been more than twenty years out of possession” should have their lands restored to them⁶. Twenty years later, when commissioning Lal Lokenath Sahi’s initial survey work, the Secretary to the Bengal Government agreed with Davidson:

[T]hroughout Chota Nagpore, a portion of the lands of nearly every village is, or has at some time, been occupied by a class of cultivators called [*bhuinhars*], who are descendants of the original clearers of the land, and as much entitled to hold it rent-free on condition of certain services to be rendered to the landlords⁷.

But, by the end of the Bhuinhari Settlement Survey, the leading scholar-administrator of the Bengal Presidency wrote:

The headman had no superior rights in the lands cultivated by other villagers. They were not landlords but chiefs, and they and the people acknowledging them held the soil they cultivated in virtue of their being the heirs of those who first utilised it; and when it became necessary to distinguish such men from cultivators of inferior title, the former were called *bhuinhárs*, breakers of the soil... When the Mundaris and Uraons submitted to a Raja, ...[t]he more privileged, who retained the designation of *bhuinhár*, had to give honorary attendance and constituted the militia of the state. The remainder supplied food and raiment⁸.

Everyone agreed that *bhuinhars*, as first settlers, enjoyed superior rights to the land, but note that in the last of the three assessments above, the corvée obligations of the *bhuinhars* has been omitted. To explain why these official accounts changed, we need to understand the nature of *bhuinhari* activism during the survey and settlement operations.

6 Dr. John Davidson to Major J.R. Ouseley, letter dated 29 August 1839, PCAD I.

7 A.R. Young to E.T. Dalton, letter dated 15 April 1859, PCAD I.

8 Sir William Wilson Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Districts of Hazáribágh and Lohárdagá* (London: Trübner, 1877), 271.

Whereas paternalistic administrators had to decide who was truly a *bhuinhar*, upwardly mobile and aspiring peasants in rural Chotanagpur were keen to make claims to *bhuinhari* status. For the administrators, those peasants who were not *bhuinhars* were either holders of *korkar* lands who had made wastelands cultivable or *khuntkattidars* who had cleared forests and converted them for cultivation. Unlike *bhuinhars*, *korkar*-holders and *khuntkattidars* were expected to pay rents at different rates fixed by customary arrangements and, later, colonial legislation. Below these three classes of peasants in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur, there were also *dhangars* who labored in the fields of superior landholders and as migrants to rural and urban destinations in the Bengal Presidency. In practice, however, any peasant, besides the *dhangars*, could claim to be a first settler or clearer of forests, so “a majority of the cultivators claimed to be proprietors on the grounds that they or their ancestors had first reclaimed the land”⁹. But those peasants, especially *bhuinhars*, who had converted to Christianity, were especially articulate and indeed vociferous in making their claims. As the authorities in Calcutta duly recognized,

some Native Converts being better informed and more independent than their fellows [had] not only “successfully resisted the encroachments of the zemindars, and this [had] not only encouraged others to maintain their own existing rights, but [had] induced some to seek by force restitution of rights of which their families [had] for long periods been dispossessed, or to claim the same rights in lands in their occupation to which no similar privileges are, or ever [had] been attached”¹⁰.

The concern here is, therefore, primarily with the activism of the *bhuinhars*, particularly the Christians among this upper peasantry, and the different peaceful forms it assumed.

The simplest form of peaceful claims-making was, in fact, for peasants to simply go to government land surveyors to demand that their claims be recorded in official registers as *bhuinhars*. This tactic was motivated undoubtedly by the surveyors’ tendency to “take up the easier cases before the more difficult ones”¹¹. But it was also driven by the belief that “in future they would get decreed to them all the lands

9 Colonel E.T. Dalton, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to R.H. Wilson, Officiating Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 14 June 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 51, July 1871, WBSA.

10 A.R. Young to E.T. Dalton, letter dated 15 April 1859, PCAD I.

11 Baboo Rakhhal Das Haldar, First Special Commissioner, Chota Nagpore Tenures’ Act, to H.L. Oliphant, Deputy Commissioner, Lohardaga, letter dated 16 May 1874, Bengal Revenue Collection 4-29/30, August 1874, WBSA.

they might claim now as Bhuinharee”¹². Accordingly, the *bhuinhars* were “constantly complaining of not having what they claim as their rent free land marked off and given over to them”¹³. At the same time, some later settlers threatened to stall survey proceedings unless their lands were also registered¹⁴. In response, we read the surveyors writing about “very unreasonable...claims” that slowed down the work of registering *bhuinhari* lands¹⁵. We read, too, of “extravagant claims” by “agitators,” many of whom “were not Bhuinhars” at all¹⁶. On one occasion, for example, some “better informed and more independent” tribal subjects referred to a “lal bahi or the red book” of the Chotanagpur raja, which apparently declared that “half the quantity of the land in each village belongs to the Kols and the other half to the landlord”¹⁷. No such book was, however, found later¹⁸. What is evident across these different cases of subaltern claim-making is a firm conviction on the part of tribal peasants of, as one official put it, “the necessity for fighting about [*bhuinhari*] lands”¹⁹.

The cases themselves present a complex portrait of *bhuinhari* claims-making before government surveyors. In one instance, a Lutheran convert named Tura

claimed 14 *powas* wet fields and 150 *kats* upland Bhuinhari in village Hakhajang, without rent or services, alleging he was ousted from his lands in 1857, because he had embraced Christianity.

It was found during the survey, however, that in the village of Hakhajang, there were 31.75 *powas* of “wet fields” or paddy-growing lowlands, of which 13.25 *powas*

12 Baboo Rakhil Das Halder to H.L. Oliphant, letter dated 15 September 1874, Revenue Department (Land Revenue) Proceedings No.30, December 1874, WBSA.

13 W. LeF. Robinson, Commissioner of Chota Nagpore, to R.L. Mangles, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 15 May 1875, Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings 4-41, June 1875, WBSA.

14 Colonel E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, Officiating Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 14 June 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 51, July 1871, WBSA.

15 W. LeF. Robinson to R.L. Mangles, letter dated 15 May 1875, Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings 4-41, June 1875, WBSA.

16 E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, letter dated 14 June 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 51, July 1871, WBSA.

17 Baboo Kalidas Paulit, Special Commissioner, Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, to the H.L. Oliphant, letter dated 19 May 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 55, July 1871, WBSA.

18 Rivers Thompson, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to Colonel E.T. Dalton, letter dated 20 July 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 59, July 1871, WBSA.

19 Captain E.T. Dalton to A.R. Young, letter dated 25 March 1859, PCAD I.

were *bhuinhari*. Moreover, Tura was found not to possess any land: “in 1857, or for several years previous to that period, though he was undoubtedly a descendant of a Bhuinhar of the village.” In other cases, ordinary ryots (peasants) had sought since time immemorial to claim rent-yielding lands as rent-free *bhuinhari* tenures²⁰. In a different context, a Lutheran Christian named Bishwasi, a resident of Beasi village claimed 3.25 kharis as *bhuinhari* land before the surveyor only to find that “the heathen inhabitants of the village refused to appear as witnesses in [his] favour”²¹. This kind of discrimination against Christians allegedly took place within villages as well as by the surveyors themselves. A certain Asaf, a Christian elder in the Lutheran mission, argued that one of the three surveyors, Gopal Chandra Mukherjee, had been paid an unstated amount of cash, some rice and two goats by the landlord’s henchman to write in his books that Asaf “had no *bhuinhari*.” He added that five other Christian families had their *bhuinhari* claims rejected, and three others received very little. In another similar case, the same surveyor, “Gopal Babu” as he was known locally, allegedly consulted with a landlord’s agent Manoram Tewari to deprive a Christian Munda named Masihdas of “four bharis” of his *bhuinhari* lands. When Masihdas protested, he was told initially by Tewari that he would receive land only on condition of paying rent, and when he did not consent to this arrangement, he was “fined one rupee by the Babu [and] [n]ot being able to pay this fine,” imprisoned for five hours in the local jail²². The Commissioner of Chotanagpur, however, refused to take these complaints against surveyors seriously. He attributed the complaints to the people being “difficult to deal with” and the surveyors’ lack of experience working among them²³. In sum, we find evidence of false or exaggerated claims to *bhuinhari* lands as well as legitimate claims being denied on false or unfair pretexts by colonial surveyors.

Given these difficulties faced by *bhuinhars*, especially Christian *bhuinhars*, it is hardly surprising that they took up a second method of peaceful activism, namely, petitioning the state. The petitions deployed the language of the colonial state to talk back to it as “authentic” tribal subjects whose lineages numbered among the

20 Baboo Rakhil Das Haldar to H.L. Oliphant, letter dated 29 August 1871, PCAD I.

21 Reverend H. Onasch and 15 Others to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, letter dated 17 May 1876, PCAD I.

22 Ibid.

23 Colonel E.T. Dalton to H.L. Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 30 June 1874, Revenue Collection 4-29/30, WBSA.

earliest of settlers in Chotanagpur.²⁴ Even before the passage of the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act, a petition to the Government of Bengal signed by two individuals representing their fellow “Native Christians of Chota Nagpore,” Noas and Eleazar, alleged that the Maharaja of Chotanagpur ought to be held responsible for the influx of alien landlords (*zamindars*) and their lessees (*thikadars*), who “oppress[ed] the poor and...cut their crops.” The petition also blamed the Commissioner, Colonel Dalton, for acting against the interests of the tribal peasantry, especially the Christians among them²⁵. We see here how the tribal/alien distinction, so cherished in colonial anthropology, came to be used strategically in this manner by protestors negotiating with the state. In a similar vein, in 1869, the year in which the Chota Nagpore Tenures Act was passed, the Deputy Commission of Lohardaga described “many Kol Christians who are not contented with it, because under it they cannot get what they want and some can get nothing.” These discontented tribal subjects, who asserted their rights to “half the lands in [their] villages,” petitioned local civil courts, and then, the High Court, both of which rejected the petitions. Thereafter, they

spent large sums of money collected under pressure from their brethren, Christian and Pagan, and because some interested persons whom they fee-ed and consulted in Calcutta and encouraged them to proceed, they object to the law as not upholding their silly and extravagant demands²⁶.

These “silly and extravagant demands” by different strata of the tribal peasantry can be explained, as Colonel Dalton did, by their preference for “a bill for the registration of all lands”²⁷. These petitioners did not simply demand registration of their own land holdings under the new law, but laid claim to all of Chotanagpur as aboriginal clearers of these forest highlands. The petitioners were even willing to pay taxes to the colonial state instead of paying rents to the Maharaja or the

24 There is a clear parallel to Russian peasants protesting everyday injustice “in the name of the tsar” in the late nineteenth century. Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

25 Reverend F. Batsch to H.L. Oliphant, letter dated 15 November 1867, PCAD I; John MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 41.

26 Cited in Annual Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1868-69, General Proceedings No. 66, July 1869, WBSA.

27 Annual Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1869-70, General Proceedings No. 75, July 1870, WBSA.

*zamindars*²⁸. These Sardars, literally “leaders,” as they came to be known among the Mundas, were “able to raise contributions” to meet the monetary costs of organizing protests and working as full-time activists²⁹.

It is noteworthy that Lutheran missionaries, too, participated in the petition campaign in the early stages of the Sardar Larai, but the Bengal government’s response put an end to their activism by the late 1870s. In 1876, Reverend H. Onasch and fifteen other Lutheran missionaries working in Chotanagpur petitioned the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal to urge him to act for the “amelioration of the social condition of the Kolhs.” It took up cudgels in defense of “a people oppressed by their landlords and tikadars,” noting that

it was a source of great encouragement to the Kolhs in their distress to have men (Europeans) in their midst who had a paternal interest for them, who were always ready to listen to their complaints, and who assisted them in their bodily and spiritual poverty gratuitously with word and deed.

Recognizing the “general dissatisfaction” among the Mundas and Oraons “with [their] social status” and their tactics of “passive resistance,” Fr. Onasch and his companions wished to “leave no legitimate means” to enable their tribal wards in Chotanagpur to achieve their aims and thus ensure the “furtherance of [the] Mission”³⁰. The Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Richard Temple, was sympathetic yet curt in his reply to the Lutheran missionaries. While lauding the missionaries for “so full a memorial, so numerously signed” with “benevolent motives...in promoting the material welfare of the Kolhs,” Temple wrote that “this matter is quite distinct from the spiritual concerns which are primarily and immediately the objects of the Mission.” “The Government,” he added, “could never let it be understood by the Kolhs that they might attain any secular advantages by embracing Christianity,” and the claims of tribal subjects would be “entitled to the same consideration as other claims and no more.” This was because, he explained,

28 Orders by the Commissioner of Chotanagpur on a Petition by the Native Christians residing in the Chotanagpur District, 23 June 1873, Revenue Miscellaneous Proceedings, Augst 1874, WBSA.

29 Colonel E.T. Dalton to H.L. Dampier, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 30 June 1874, Revenue Collection 4-29/30, WBSA.

30 Reverend H. Onasch and 15 Others to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, letter dated 17 May 1876, PCAD I.

the benefits asked by the memorialists so impressively on behalf of the Kolhs could be conceded in full only by depriving other classes, Hindu and Mahomedan, of something which they now enjoy³¹.

As their petition was rejected by the Bengal government, the Lutheran mission in Chotanagpur received a severe blow. As a result, they withdrew from political activities and turned their attention to spiritual matters.

The Christian *bhuinhars*, disillusioned by this change of heart by their former patrons, nonetheless decided to continue the petition campaign on their own. In 1881, five years after the ill-fated missionary petition, the Sardars addressed the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal thus:

We are the aboriginals of this place, i.e., of Chotanagpur, but at the present we are going to be destitute of our forefathers' land. Moreover, our power over the lands is going to be destroyed forever owing to our ignorance. Your Majesty [sic] will decide favourably after considering our...state of ignorance. So that none of the heathen kings or *zemindars* may overrule us³².

The language of this petition admirably mimics the official discourse of colonial primitivism. Not only does it refer to the petitioners as “aboriginals,” but it even accepts their “ignorance” as a statement of fact. In the same year, another petition from “more than 14,000 native Christians of the Chota Nagpore Division” asked for permission to “form themselves into village communities directly under the Government, and be relieved from all connections with their landlord, the Raja of Chota Nagpore, and his tenure-holders”³³. The language of the petition here follows directly from that of Colonel Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, by then the leading work on the “tribes” of the Bengal Presidency. It is important to observe that the desire to form village communities directly under the British colonial state bears no traces of proto-nationalism or anti-colonialism: rather, the aim was to beseech the state to remove the exactions of landlords, and to be taxed directly by the state. As a subsequent petition from 1887 reads:

31 Sir Richard Temple, Representations on Behalf of the Kolhs of Chota Nagpore made by the German Lutheran Missionaries, Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, 5 July 1876, PCAD I.

32 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 261.

33 A. Mackenzie, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to The Secretary to the Government of India, Home, Revenue and Agricultural Department, letter dated 22 February 1881, PCAD I.

we are willing to pay the roll (or revenue) to the English Government, but we wish to be free from the Nagbanshis (*i.e.*, the Maharajah of Chota Nagpore)...Under the English administration we have become wiser than before, for which we are thankful to the English; now they should also free us from our earthly distress³⁴.

Accordingly, petitions were sent not only to the Lieutenant-Governor and Governor-General in Calcutta, but even the Secretary of State for India in London. Each time, however, the Sardars met with rejection and failure: in the state's view, the petitions were "really prepared by one or two mischievous agitators, with the assistance of native legal advisers" and there was "no such real and genuine discontent among the Kol population as the [petition] purports to embody and represent"³⁵.

In response to failure, the Munda Sardars' petitions drew on the powerful imagery and metaphors of Biblical teachings to make their petitions more persuasive and to speak for what was increasingly represented as a quasi-national collective with common interests. Arguably, the nationalistic language was itself a by-product of the nineteenth-century missionary-tribal encounter: it is, after all, quite plausible that German Lutheran missionaries imported *völkisch* ideas into rural Chotanagpur, especially via their systematic codification of Munda, Oraon and other previously oral languages and myths³⁶. For instance, an 1881 petition drew on new notions of national space and the wandering Israelites in the Old Testament to argue that

[e]ach race has got their peculiar place of habitation, as for English in England...We do not beg Your Majesty for a [different]...right than that of the Israelites, who after wandering in the jungles, and suffering many trials became heir of the holy land³⁷.

Later, in 1887, the General Conference of German Lutheran Missionaries in Ranchi received a petition from Munda and Oraon agitators, which made a claim to ancestral lands by virtue of being the original settlers of Chotanagpur; they did this using a

34 C.C. Stevens, Commissioner of the Chotanagpur Division, to The Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

35 A. Mackenzie to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home, Revenue and Agricultural Department, letter dated 22 February 1881, PCAD I.

36 For a similar argument with respect to the Santals and Norwegian missionaries in late nineteenth century Chotanagpur, see Marine Carrin and Harald Tambs-Lyche, *An Encounter of Peripheries: Santals, Missionaries, and Their Changing Worlds, 1867-1900* (New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2008).

37 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 262.

Biblical warrant and an assertion of nationhood on behalf of the two largest “tribes” in Chotanagpur (the Mundas and the Oraons):

Our forefathers came into this country and cleared the jungle. Now the Hindus rob us of our fields...Every nation has its own Government; only we Mundas and Oraons have not. As every child inherits his father’s rights, so we wish to have the rights of our forefathers. The transmission of ancestral rights is exemplified in the story of Abraham³⁸.

In the same year, a petition drafted by two former students of a Lutheran mission school displayed the influence of Christianity on the Sardars even more explicitly: “Anyone who reads Leviticus, chapter 25, can understand the conditions of our people; they were similar to those of the Israelites.” This petition went further to explicitly see the German Lutheran priests as the inheritors of the pre-colonial legacy of monastic orders enjoying sovereignty over lay forest-dwelling populations, including the right to tax them³⁹. The authors of this petition end it with the following words: “We are the Mundaris, the Oraons are the Kols.” Insofar as “Kol” was a term of abuse, leveled at Mundas and Oraons alike by upper-caste Bengalis in particular, this claim that the Oraons and not the Mundas were Kols, must necessarily be read as one demarcating national boundaries and identifying the Mundas as a superior *Volk*. In this manner, in claiming to speak not only for themselves but for all Mundas, the *bhuinhars* actively drew on the religious and nationalistic discourses that had been made available to them via the Lutheran fathers.

The third and final method of peaceful activism by the *bhuinhars*, particularly the Christians, was a radical theologico-political assertion of quasi-national autonomy under British colonial overlordship. The earliest expression of this radical political solution appears to have occurred in 1871, when a young man who had “returned from [a stint in] the tea districts [in Assam or North Bengal] with money” claimed to be a “spiritual as well as...temporal guide” of the agitating Mundas in Lohardaga. This man, who remains unnamed in the colonial archive, used his earnings from the tea plantations and his claims of spiritual superiority to organize a group of followers protesting the Bhuinhari Settlement Act of 1869. It is wholly plausible that this anonymous Munda spiritual leader was a *bhuinhar* by birth, who had lost his lands when he was away in the tea districts. Yet his most active followers were not

38 C.C. Stevens to The Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

39 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 261.

bhuinhars at all, but *korkar*-holders who had freshly transformed wastelands into cultivable spaces⁴⁰. A decade later, in 1881, a small group calling itself the “Children of Mael,” headed by a self-proclaimed “John the Baptist,” pretended to establish a “Raj” at Doisa, the old capital of the Chotanagpur rajas. Using their “religious authority,” they subsequently proceeded to send “threatening orders to the Munsif of Lohardugga”⁴¹. A theologically-based claim to sovereignty was, of course, implicit in these actions. Their view was, however, not necessarily any more anti-colonial than that of the more moderate Munda Sardars. As a similar group led by a certain Man-massih argued in 1884,

subject to the dues of the State for revenue, the land of Chota Nagpore is the inalienable property of the Munda race, and...their title to it is not invalidated either by law or prescription⁴².

The Raj itself was not under any threat. What was being opposed was the social order dominated by landlords and their henchmen, and the past came to be rejected in the search for a better future.

The theology of the more radical Sardars was undoubtedly indebted to Christianity, especially the Lutheran variant that attracted thousands until the late 1870s, but it also strove to be independent of the churches and their missionaries. In 1887, “Johan of Champaidih,” a Christian *bhuinhar* in Lohardaga, “began collecting subscriptions and went about circulating the most preposterous ideas regarding the existence of a suppressed decree which had followed a petition to the Queen and a Parliamentary Commission” outside the purview of mission authority. Johan and his supporters even sent a “printed notice” of the fake decree to the civil courts in Lohardaga, “demanding that the issues of all processes and the execution of all decrees should be stayed pending the orders of the Queen and Parliament,” which apparently had upheld the petitioners’ claims on tribal land rights⁴³. Other Sardars

40 Colonel E.T. Dalton to R.H. Wilson, letter dated 14 June 1871, Bengal Revenue Proceedings No. 51, July 1871, WBSA.

41 C.C. Stevens to The Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

42 P. Nolan, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to the Secretary to the Government of India, letter dated 17 May 1886, PCAD I.

43 Annual General Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1889-90, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 1, October 1890, WBSA; W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 28 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

told the Commissioner of Chotanagpur that the Lieutenant-Governor had looked favorably on their petitions, and hence, “asked [him], pending final orders, to direct that they should “deposit into the Lohardugga treasury the rent of their *bhuinhari* lands in Chota Nagpore.” Around the same time, other Sardars were meeting secretly in the Khunti area

- (1) To induce the “brethren” to abstain from attending the churches or allowing their children to go to the mission schools.
- (2) To collect subscriptions, pressure being sometimes used for this purpose.
- (3) To dispute the authority and to throw discredit on the local officers.
- (4) To incite the people to take possession of the “*manjhihas*: lands, or lands held and cultivated by the proprietor of the villages or their lessees.

Another set of Sardars, including two Munda men named Nikodim and Johan, made their way to Calcutta to consult lawyers and sent back a letter to their “Lohardugga brethren” to say that “notices are being issued to the four hakims of Singbhoom and ten hakims of Ranchi.” “Hakim,” a Persian term used typically to refer to a doctor or healer, was used here to refer to Christian missionaries. Nikodim, Johan and others also told the Mundas of Sonpur pargana in present-day Khunti district, one of the main centers of the Kol Insurrection of 1831-32, to seize *manjhihas* lands from their current owners, tribal or non-tribal and to sow paddy (*dhān*) in them⁴⁴. Christian missionar authority, identified with unhelpful Lutheran priests, thus became a key target for *bhuinhari* activists, even as it continued to nourish and inform the Sardar Larai.

The evidence provided so far gives much reason to believe that the Sardar Larai was anything but a coherent movement with methods and aims remaining constant from c. 1860-1890. Nor is it the case that *all* Mundas or Oraons participated in it, as subsequent historians such as Kumar Suresh Singh and Ranajit Guha have suggested. The movement may be said to have begun with claims-making addressed towards government land surveyors adjudicating the true extent of *bhuinhari* lands in Chotanagpur. It then proceeded to supplement such claims-making with petitions to government officials in Ranchi, Calcutta, and later, London. Finally, as the land survey operations came to a close by 1880 with some discontent remaining among leaders and followers, certain Sardars conceived of a more radical solution to the *bhuinhars*’ problems, namely, to

44 C.C. Stevens to The Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 19 November 1887, PCAD I.

excite in the minds of the masses of a future of brilliant prosperity with a confiscation of land of all Hindus, this result being preceded by a collection of subscriptions to be expended by the heads of the agitation⁴⁵.

This project of agrarian radicalism not only reaffirmed the *bhuinhars'* position atop Munda village society, but also became the basis for remaking "communities" in rural Chotanagpur in future. The aim was less a restoration of old land titles than a radical reordering of Munda social worlds by synchronizing it better with modern state structures as represented by the paternalistic colonial administration of the region.

3. The Switch to Violence: Rethinking the Birsaite *Ulgulan*

In which land has the New King been born?
Look up! The comet has risen in the sky!
The New King has been born at Chalkad.
In the West the comet has risen.

Popular Birsaite Song Commemorating the Birth of Birsa Munda

There is little doubt that the Birsaite *ulgulan* was built on the foundations established by the Sardar Larai. Yet there is no linear path to the former from the latter. Our non-linear explanation here thus must take seriously the indirect causal influence of Christian missionary activity in rural Chotanagpur. For our purposes, Christianity was neither monolithic nor did it colonize the tribal subjects' consciousness⁴⁶ in these forest highlands of eastern India. Following Elizabeth Elbourne's excellent work on missions and the colonized in southern Africa, I question here any simple identification of Christian missions with the global workings of empire and capital, and seek a better understanding of the many political meanings and uses of Christianity in colonial state margins⁴⁷. By doing so, I want to extend my analysis of modern tribal

45 Annual General Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1878-79, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 1-5, November 1879, WBSA.

46 In this sense, my analysis here departs from the well-known thesis of Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). See Nathaniel Roberts, "Is Conversion a Colonization of Consciousness," *Anthropology and Theory* 12 (3), 271-294.

47 Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's

claims-making so far as to argue that missions ought to be seen at the center of agrarian disputes in colonial Chotanagpur, and that their mutual rivalries and strategies were decisive in shaping everyday political subjectivities among modern tribal subjects in the countryside.

The extraordinary impact of the German Lutheran missionaries on the Sardar Larai has been clear enough in the previous section; yet equally remarkable is the story of its rapid decline in rural Chotanagpur following the Lutheran fathers' failed petition to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1876. The German Lutheran Church had already split in 1869, over, among other things, the divergent attitudes of priests to the agrarian disputes around them⁴⁸. Those priests who favored the colonial state's status quoism, formed the Anglican mission with their own church, St. Paul's, in Ranchi, whereas those who hoped for a more radical solution to the problems faced by the tribal laity remained Lutherans. But the rejection of the 1876 petition by the Bengal government caused a change of strategy for the Lutherans. Told to concern themselves with "spiritual" rather than "political" matters, the Lutheran missionaries had little choice but to withdraw their support for their wards' petitioning campaign from the late 1870s onwards⁴⁹. Since the priests were reliant on the colonial state for funds to run their mission, they were compelled to obey the Bengal government's dictates. However, subsequent cuts to their finances led them to levy a "church tax" on every Christian family and to ask for land "donations" from better-off converts in order to make their mission stations self-sufficient⁵⁰. Coupled with the lack of assistance in agrarian disputes, the church tax was widely seen by the tribal laity as a betrayal of their sociopolitical and economic interests. Mass defections took place from between 1876 and 1885. Some Lutheran converts gave up Christianity altogether to return to their ancestral ritual worlds; others sought a synthesis by reconciling Lutheran catechisms to older ritual beliefs and practices; yet others, who

University Press, 2002). See also the recent collection of essays in David F. Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson, eds., *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

48 Sarju Mahto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845* (Ranchi: Chotanagpur Christian Publishing House, 1971), 78-88. Mahto cites Dr. Alfred Notrott of the Lutheran mission lamenting thus: "By 1869, twenty-two Christian Kols were in the prison due to the land agitation, but the [other] missionaries did not care for them, nor reached them books nor visited them."

49 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 43.

50 Fidelis de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890* (Bangalore: Redemptorist Publications, 1975), 102.

were active participants in the Sardar Larai, turned to the Belgian Jesuit Mission for succor in their time of need. The final break between the Lutherans and tribal subjects came in 1887, when some ex-Lutheran Sardars asked the German missionaries to intercede on their behalf in representations to the government and the missionaries refused. Subsequently, the Sardars lodged complaints against the missionaries, and the latter responded with a libel suit against the agitators on the land question⁵¹. Thereafter, the Sardars and their followers would, perforce, require new patrons.

The Catholic Church, represented by the Belgian Jesuit Mission to Chotanagpur, was an obvious alternative as patron. Founded in 1869 by Father Augustus Stockman, the Belgian Jesuit Mission had only begun taking an interest in agrarian matters in 1880-81⁵². In the 1870s, there had been an intense “competition for souls” with the Lutherans and the eventual “consolidation” of mission stations among the Munda and Ho “rascals of the valley” located between Ranchi and Chaibasa⁵³. It was Father Joseph Mullender who began assisting some tribal converts in their court cases against their landlords. The Jesuit Superior in Calcutta supported Mullender’s initiative, despite opposition within the Ranchi Mission, with the following words: “The natives require help and cannot defend themselves; we must look upon them as minors and assist them in all we can”⁵⁴. Unlike the Lutherans, who tested their laity on elements of the catechism, the Jesuits did not require much of converts except baptism. As such, the key to the Jesuits’ success in the 1880s lay, in the words of a later mission historian, in its emphasis on “offering direct assistance more practical than preaching”⁵⁵. As C.C. Stevens, the Commissioner of the Chotanagpur Division, wrote at the end of the decade,

the conversions to Christianity were effected by the rough and simple process of depriving the new convert of his topknot, and also that those who allowed themselves to be thus easily converted to the new faith did so in the full hope and belief that they would be thereby enabled to escape from the exactions of their landlords, whether in the shape of rent cesses or predial services⁵⁶.

51 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 43.

52 For details of the early history of the mission in Chotanagpur, see Pierre Ponette, *The Dawn of Ranchi Mission, 1869-1885* (Ranchi: Dharmik Sahitya Sadan, 1992).

53 *Ibid.*, 32, 48, 59.

54 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 125.

55 *Ibid.*, 123.

56 Annual General Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1889-90, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 1, October 1890, WBSA.

Seeking to escape the rent and corvée demands of their landlords, as many as sixty thousand tribal subjects converted en masse to Catholicism between 1881 and 1889⁵⁷. In the history of the Chotanagpur Mission, this phase of expansion has been associated primarily with one Belgian priest, Father Constant Lievens⁵⁸, and his exceptionally popular methods in intervening in the agrarian disputes between tribal peasants of different ranks and their *zamindars*. It is to these methods to which I shall now turn.

Constant Lievens' interest in Chotanagpur's agrarian disputes was neither obvious nor pre-determined. Born and raised in a poor rural home in Moorsdale, Belgium, he participated as a young man in a movement seeking "Christian independence" for the Flemish-speaking population in Flanders⁵⁹. After his theological training at the Major Seminary in Bruges, Lievens arrived in Calcutta, bewildered by the overwhelming diversity of the British colonial capital:

There are people of all sorts here: white, black, coffee-coloured, yellow; Jews, Turks, Chinese, French, English, German, Greeks, Americans, etc. All kinds of languages are spoken, and one sees all kinds of costumes⁶⁰.

A brief stint ensued in Asansol, in the northwestern corner of Bengal. His distaste for Hinduism, however, soon led him to desire to go work among "the aboriginal" in the "mission in the West"⁶¹. In March 1885, Lievens came to Jamgain, near Khunti, to work among "these people [who] are rather dark, but not negroes. They have thick lips, a flat nose, a round face, long black hair and are almost beardless"⁶². Working in the western part of the Division, especially in Lohardaga, Gumla, Palamau, and Chatra, Lievens began learning Mundari, and soon sought to baptize entire villages en masse. Whereas Fr. Mullender had drawn a line between assisting Munda converts in their court cases, and advocacy concerning their "rights and exploitation,"

57 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 133.

58 Lievens, has, by far, the most number of biographies devoted to him among all the Belgian Jesuit fathers of Chotanagpur. See, in particular, L. Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.* (Ranchi: Satya Bharati, 1985); Francis J. Bowen, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.: The Apostle of Chota-Nagpur*, St. Louis, Mo (B. Herder Book Company 1936); Peter Tete, ed. *Constant Lievens and the History of the Catholic Church in Chotanagpur* (Ranchi: Archbishop's House, 1993).

59 Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.*, 23.

60 *Ibid.*, 61.

61 *Ibid.*, 68-72.

62 *Ibid.*, 128.

Lievens obliterated this line to reach out to “disaffected Protestants” abandoned by the Lutheran missionaries⁶³. He did so apparently because a *jamadar* (constable) at Torpa, whose Anglican wife Lievens had cured, advised him:

If you really desire the conversion of the natives, you have only to undertake the defence of their interests, especially in connection with the question of their rights regarding land tenure and landlord service, and you will have as many Christians as you desire⁶⁴.

Following this advice, Lievens approached lawyers and pleaders in Ranchi to fight cases for his wards at reduced charges, testified in their favor, urged them “to ask for rent-receipts from landlords, and to refuse *beth-begari* [corvée] beyond state-imposed limits”, and hence, to “look on Catholicism as a society, where they could be protected”⁶⁵.

Interestingly, Lievens supported more or less the same demands as the Munda Sardars did, but since he saw theirs as a “real socialistic agitation,” he did not endorse it. By contrast, he advocated non-violent protest of the kind that political scientists now call “rightful resistance”⁶⁶, that is, protest or resistance politics within the contours of the law of the land:

Pay the legal amount of land-rent but nothing more. If the landlord is not satisfied with that, let him go to court...Insist on a receipt for your payments of land-rents. If the landlord refuses to give one, pay him nothing, let him go to court...Render no landlord service beyond the legal limits. If the landlord demands exorbitant service, refuse him your services. Let him go to court...If you are ill-treated by the landlord or his armed men, summon the landlord to court...You owe absolutely no payment to the police. Refuse to give them what they ask. If they ill-treat you, summon them to court⁶⁷.

It was in this manner that the new converts to Catholicism came to see Lievens as “their friend and protector” and “learned about their rights, and how to oppose the illegal demands of the landlords.” But two problems were inherent in Lievens’ approach. Firstly, there was no way for him to distinguish between participants and non-participants in the Sardar Larai, and hence, he could not have known that “some of the converts seem to have regarded themselves as a league against the landlords.”

63 Tete, *Constant Lievens and the History of the Catholic Church in Chotanagpur*, 6.

64 Bowen, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.: The Apostle of Chota-Nagpur*, 64.

65 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 134.

66 For an elaboration of this concept, see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

67 Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.*, 143.

As a later church historian puts it, “though he seemed uncertain of their motives; he simply focused on defending and protecting them”⁶⁸. Secondly, the rapid expansion of the mission meant that there was little scope to build rural stations as part of a lasting organizational structure to cater to the needs of the newly-baptized tribal subjects. It is therefore not surprising, that one of the new converts later told the Deputy Commissioner of Lohardaga, Mr. Renny:

I became a Christian because I was put to much trouble by [the landlord] Gajadhar Deogharia. He used to make me render *bethbegari* almost daily, just as if I was a Dhanger, Lievens Sahib said that by becoming Christian I would only have to render *bethbegari* according to former usage. My *bethbegari* has not been reduced since I became a Christian; it is therefore that I am troubled in mind. I have learnt to make the sign of the cross only, nothing more. I have not seen the Padri Saheb since...the month after I became a Christian. No one has ever come to instruct us. My fellow castemen have not outcasted me yet, because I am only nominally a Christian⁶⁹.

Christianity, as a political resource, was not yielding the gains that it had promised to deliver. For both reasons, it was almost certain that there would be an unavoidable clash between Lievens’ intentions in maximizing converts and the converts’ intentions of using Catholic missionary aid to outdo their landlords.

The clash between the intentions of the Jesuit missionaries and their newly-converted tribal subjects in 1889-90, I argue, *caused* a switch from peaceful to violent forms of subaltern claim-making in rural Chotanagpur. The anti-landlord politics of the Sardars and their followers had attracted them to Lievens and the Catholic Church during the 1880s. Lievens had, after all, done everything except to endorse their movement:

The inhabitants of this country ask neither for gold nor silver, nor medicines, nor miracles, nor schools, nor knowledge, nor learning, nor wealth, nor anything else we might think of. What do these Mundas, Oraons and Kharias want then? One burden is intolerable for them. They cherish the land they till, the land cleared by their fathers. Then the Hindus came and robbed them of their land and laid landlord service on them. Now, help the people within the limits of the law, you will become their friend and they become Christians with sincere hearts. A Munda will never become a Christian unless he has first received a favour⁷⁰.

68 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 134-36.

69 W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 30 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

70 Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.*, 202-03.

Emboldened by Lievens' support, the Sardars recommenced their agitation in the countryside. The Commissioner, at first, warned Fr. Motet at Lohardaga station of "of the extreme folly of meddling with the land question," and urged him to recall Lievens from his travels in "the disturbed tracts"⁷¹. Lievens did not, however, return from his labors in the Lohardaga countryside. Some followers of the Sardar Larai began to argue that they had converted to Catholicism by Queen Victoria's order, and since she "had now become their friend and relations...they were no longer required to perform forced labor or pay high rents"⁷². Others said that "they were informed by a certain Padri Saheb (naming [Lievens]) that if they became Christians they would not be subject to extortions or ill-usage"⁷³. Soon, there were "complaints made by various landholders of the action of the Roman Catholic missionaries," who were causing their tribal converts to go "from village to village...making people Christians by cutting their hair and threats of damage to crops"⁷⁴. In Kurdeg, in the southwestern corner of Chotanagpur, "a body of Roman Catholic Christians, numbering some 2,500" reportedly rescued four prisoners from the local jail, and the Commissioner noted that "these men...armed with various weapons...were guarding the roads at every point"⁷⁵. The Deputy Commissioner of Lohardaga, Colonel E.G. Lillington later noted that the Jesuits, especially Lievens, had "not [been] careful about mixing up spiritual and temporal matters," and had, unwittingly, spurred a new phase of the Sardar Larai in his district. Lievens was summoned to Ranchi by the Commissioner, W.H. Grimley, and told to desist from his radical missiological methods. These methods, Lievens was informed, had led him to be construed by lay Catholic tribals as sympathetic to "the most preposterous ideas" of the Sardar Larai⁷⁶. Thereafter, in 1892, gagged by the colonial administration and his mission superiors as well as dis-

71 W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 13 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

72 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur : With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 212.

73 W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 30 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

74 Annual General Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1889-90, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 1, October 1890, WBSA; W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 13 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

75 W.H. Grimley, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, letter dated 30 November 1889, IOR/L/PJ/6/268, File 23.

76 Annual General Report for the Chota Nagpur Division, 1889-90, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 1, October 1890, WBSA.

playing the first symptoms of tuberculosis, Lievens withdrew from Chotanagpur to rest in the mission station at Kurseong in the Himalayan foothills of north Bengal; a year later, when it was clear that his condition would not improve, he returned to his native Flanders where he died on November 7, 1893⁷⁷. The Jesuit Mission in Chotanagpur had, by then, collapsed due to mass defections from the Catholic fold⁷⁸.

The Sardars' disillusionment with their missionary patrons led them to renew their struggle by adopting a more militant character. It should not be forgotten that these were the most educated among Chotanagpur's tribal subjects, and as descendants of *bhunhari* lineages, they represented the interests of the dominant sections of the Munda and Oraon peasantry. A later chronicler of this period has written that "between 1890 and 1895 the atmosphere remained tense" and reports of plotted uprising were rampant, though there were, in fact, no major incidents of social protest. In 1891, however, the Sardars lodged a police complaint against the Lutheran Mission, and the following year, some of these political activists had "founded an independent Catholic sect"⁷⁹. The discontent of the *bhuinhars* and their supporters was brewing, but colonial officials and missionaries had not anticipated the outbreak of violence in rural Chotanagpur in 1895, and then again, in 1899-1900. The switch in the Sardars' strategy appears clearly enough in a remark made by one of them, revealed later by the German Jesuit priest, Father J.B. Hoffman:

We have appealed to the sarkar [government] for redress and got nothing. We have turned to the missions, and they too have not saved us from the Dikus [undesirable aliens]. Now there is nothing left for us but to look to one of our own men⁸⁰.

That man was Birsa Munda, a slender young man in his mid-twenties, who was destined to soon play a more elaborate variant of the role of Sidhu and Kanu in the Santal Hul⁸¹.

77 Tete, *Constant Lievens and the History of the Catholic Church in Chotanagpur*, 11.

78 Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur: With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, November 1889-March 1890*, 312-16.

79 MacDougall, *Land or Religion? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95*, 45.

80 Fr. J.B. Hoffman, S.J., Catholic Missionary of Sarwada, Thana Khunti, to Mr. A. Forbes, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, letter dated 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

81 I have examined the Santal Hul in a manner that complements the argument of this paper in chapter 3 of my PhD dissertation titled "Negotiating Leviathan: Statemaking and Resistance in the Margins of Modern India" (Yale University, 2013). For different perspectives on the Hul, see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in*

Birsa's year and place of birth are both disputed, but his biographers⁸² agree on the broad contours of his early years before the launch of the *ulgulan* (uprising) of 1895-1901. The dates for Birsa's birth range between 1872 and 1875, and two places, Ulihatu and Chalkad, vie in the popular imagination as his true birthplace. He was a *bhuinhar*, whose family had converted to Lutheranism a generation earlier. Birsa's father Sugana Munda was a Lutheran preacher (*pracharak*), and it was not surprising that the young Birsa, like many others who grew up in the forest highlands of Arki and Bandgaon, attended the German mission school in Chaibasa between 1886 and 1890. Apparently, Birsa was present when Dr. Alfred Notrott, the Chaibasa mission-in-charge, delivered a "sermon...on the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven," assuring his students "that if they remained Christians and followed his instructions, he could get back all lands they had lost." But with the growing disaffection between the Munda Sardars and the Lutheran missionaries, Birsa increasingly heard the Sardars being called "cheats." By 1890, when the Sardars had parted ways with the Catholics, too, Birsa left his school in Chaibasa and his family abandoned the Lutheran Mission on account of their political loyalties. For the next three years, Birsa worked in the house of Anand Panre, under whom he adopted Vaishnavite habits, including wearing a sacred thread and a sandalwood mark on the forehead, vegetarianism, and the worship of the *tulsi* (mint) plant. Thereafter, increasingly drawn into political activism during the final stages of the Sardar Larai, he left the Panres and wandered from place to place in search of food, work, and a sense of purpose in life. He is reputed to have had many romantic liaisons during this period in 1894-95 and later, but none of them lasted long and their details were subsequently suppressed in the light of his strict advocacy of monogamy to his followers⁸³.

Birsa first entered the colonial records in September 1895, when he was arrested for preaching radical ideas that alarmed government officials. This ambitious yet

Colonial India; K.K.Dutta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855-1857* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1940).

82 Fr. J.B. Hoffman, S.J., Catholic Missionary of Sarwada, Thana Khunti, to Mr. A. Forbes, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, letter dated 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869; Kumar Suresh Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chhotanagpur, 1874-1901* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1966); Surendra Prasad Sinha, *Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan* (Ranchi: Bihar Tribal Research Institute, 1964).

83 This paragraph draws on the pioneering findings in Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chhotanagpur, 1874-1901*, 36-44.

purposeless young man, whose brief life had seen a great deal of religious and political ferment, had started telling his friends that year that he “had received the Divine word” through dreams and mystical visions in the forest. He told Bir Singh Munda, a well-respected Sardar in his village of Chalkad, that “he had been entrusted with everything in the world by God himself. He would cure the sick; they would not have to pay rent etc.” When a smallpox epidemic broke out, a traditional healer complained that Birsa’s upstart ways had caused it and he was compelled to leave Chalkad only to return later once it was shown that the epidemic had continued to wreak havoc in his absence. Drawing on Christian as well as Vaishnava teachings, he “declared his faith in the efficacy of prayer as the cure of all diseases” and recommended that villagers “bear their sickness, disease and suffering cheerfully”⁸⁴. This was, undeniably, a challenge to the “traditional” Munda order, founded as it was on the ritual authority of the *pahan* and his intercourse with the spirits (*bongas*)⁸⁵. This challenge was made more explicit in Birsa’s “exhortations to live good lives and not do puja to “Bhuts,” &c”⁸⁶ so that he could “closely knit the Mundas like a garland” (*Gutukedam Birisam galangkeda*). Likewise, his campaign against the “traditional” consumption of *hanria* (rice beer), including in rituals, is striking:

Birsa says, give up drinking rice-beer and liquor.
 For this reason our land drifts away.
 Drunkenness and sleep are no good.
 The enemies laugh at us.
 The beer distilled from fermented rice stinks.
 A person’s body and spirit too decay likewise⁸⁷.

Here, then, was a conscious attempt to remake rural communities of tribal subjects in a modern ritual and political idiom.

84 *Ibid.*, 46-48.

85 On the “traditional” Munda ritual world upheld by the colonial and postcolonial states, see “The Munda Land System,” in *The Munda World*, ed. Pierre Ponette (Ranchi: Catholic Press, 1978); Victor Rosner, “Munda Worship and Witchcraft,” (Ranchi: Jesuit Mission Archive).

86 Confidential Correspondence Regarding Birsa’s Arrest, H.I.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of India, letter dated 14 September 1895, Foreign Department Proceedings (Internal B) Nos. 117-129, October 1895, NAI.

87 *Birisae kajitana ili arkhi bagetapel Neatege disum tabu bualtanal Bunul durum do kare buginl Bairikodo reko landabutanal Soea mandi rea’ ili soantanal Horomo ji rati sowantana.*

Alongside this challenge to the “traditional” Munda order upheld by the colonial state, the Birsaite sought a viable alternative model of local sovereignty. Birsa appointed two “*dewans*” or prime ministers, Deoki Paur and Sao Mundari, thereby mimicking the political structure of forest kingdoms that had dominated this eastern Indian region over the previous five or so centuries. At the same time, he and his growing band of followers broadened the scope of the Sardar movement by drawing additional enterprising members from the lower strata of the peasantry. The blend of the old and the new is noteworthy here as it reminds us, as a recent anthropologist has noted, that modernity is, ultimately, “about the newness of old things”⁸⁸. In this spirit, the Birsaite argued that

they [had] memorialized Government at a considerable cost, but justice was not done to them at all. If, therefore, they rise against Government in this part of the country, then Government will do justice to them and restore their lost Raj to them as before⁸⁹.

Note that, here too the onus was on the British Government to restore the Munda Raj by evicting those hostile to the Sardars, whether *dikus* or Christian missionaries. It was not the case that the beginning of the Birsaite *ulgulan* had any basis in rising prices or economic hardship, often seen as an immediate cause of millenarian movements in colonial contexts⁹⁰. The table below amply clarifies this point via descriptive statistics of rice prices across the districts of Chotanagpur between 1893 and 1895. Neither was it the case, as Ranajit Guha presumed without any evidence, that “the Birsaite *ulgulan* [was] launched with the declared aim of liberating the Mundas from British rule”⁹¹. However, unlike the radical historian of South Asia, bent on incorporating subaltern grievances into a singular anti-colonial narrative, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur W.H. Grimley understood the Birsaite’s political aims very well:

Any excitement which is mixed up with the land question accentuates the necessity of passing the Land Tenancy Bill as soon as possible. It may not be likely to settle all the

88 Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), xv.

89 Confidential Correspondence Regarding Birsa’s Arrest, H.I.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of India, letter dated 14 September 1895, Foreign Department Proceedings (Internal B) Nos. 117-129, October 1895, NAI.

90 See, for example, the five historical case studies outlined in Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion*.

91 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 26.

difficulties of the people, but it will confer some boon upon them and convey to them the assurance that Government is mindful of their needs.

Upon being arrested, Birsa had purportedly told his followers in Chalkad and its adjoining areas that “the “Sarkar” [government] could not keep him over three days,” after which he was certain to return. When he did not return, his disappointed supporters dispersed and wondered what lay next for them according to the Birsaites’ eschatology. As it turned out, the colonial government saw him only as a “fanatic” with “preposterous ideas,” which meant a limited jail term of only two years⁹². For his part, in the Jesuit missionary J.B. Hoffman’s words, Birsa “observed a calculated good behavior in jail and succeeded in having himself looked up as a rather simple and innocuous man” even as his followers “sneered at the Government sentence against Birsa, and openly prepared the crowds to recommence the whole game over again as Birsa would be back”⁹³. The project of remaking tribal communities in a modern theologico-political idiom, therefore, still remained alive despite the setback of Birsa’s two-year jail term.

District/Year (Rice in Seers)	1892-93	1893-94	1894-95
Hazaribagh	13	15	16s 10.6c
Lohardaga	13	17	18s 8c
Palamau	16s 15c	15s 12c	15s 3c
Manbhum	12 ½	15s 5.3c	21s 5.3c
Singhbhum	14	13	14
AVERAGE	13s 14 1/5c	15s 3 7/15c	17s 2.2c

Table 4.1 Change in Food Prices Prior to the Birsaites’ *Ulgulan*, compiled and tabulated from the Annual General Administration Report of the Chota Nagpur Division for 1894-95, General Miscellaneous Proceedings No. 29, November 1895, WBSA.

92 Confidential Correspondence Regarding Birsa’s Arrest, H.I.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of India, letter dated 14 September 1895, Foreign Department Proceedings (Internal B) Nos. 117-129, October 1895, NAI.

93 Fr. J.B. Hoffman, S.J., Catholic Missionary of Sarwada, Thana Khunti, to Mr. A. Forbes, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, letter dated 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

On Birsa's return from jail, his political project resumed again in 1898-99. This time, however, it was accompanied by an explicit turn to limited forms of political violence against local powerholders in the colonial order, most notably "traditional" heads of community or *mundas*, Christian missionaries, and lower-level government functionaries. Only the elect could engage legitimately in such violence against the putative enemies of the new community-in-the-making. Accordingly, the Birsaites "form[ed] an entirely new caste of more than Hindu severity" to distinguish themselves from ordinary Munda tribal subjects. By doing so, they

creat[ed] a distinct caste of Mundas, who absolutely refuse[d] to have any intercourse not only with their ordinary tribesmen, but who [would] not so much as allow their non-Birsaites brothers or grown up children to eat with them or cross their threshold. The house of a Birsaites was declared absolutely sacred, and no non-Birsaites was for any reason to cross it.

Thursday and Sunday were "sanctified for nominal religious services," which would take place in the homes of *gurus* or *prachars*, modeled along the lines of Lutheran or Catholic *pracharakas* (catechists or preachers). The Birsaites also had a closed inner circle of *puranaks* ("ancients"), who were responsible for spreading the new gospel and expanding the rebel group by recruiting new members or *nanaks* across Chotanagpur. Nocturnal meetings were regularly held at different organizational levels for new recruits, *gurus*, and *puranaks*⁹⁴.

The internal structure of this group, it ought to be noted, was not too different from other warrior ascetic orders in northern India such as the Ramanandi Nagas⁹⁵. Ritual purity required violence as an expression of power, and violence demanded a prior purity in ritual terms. Contrary to Ranajit Guha's primitivist notion of tribal "solidarities"⁹⁶, by no means was every Munda a part of – or even expected to be a part of – this *ulgulan*. Only the *nanaks*, after reaching a certain level of discipline and

94 Ibid.

95 On these Śaivite ascetic orders, see William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 1 (1978).

96 According to Ranajit Guha, "Ethnicity...was a correlate of class solidarity in some of the nineteenth-century peasant rebellions. At one extreme it could be expressed, positively in a ritual affirmation of the tribal identity of the peasantry involved in an uprising... At the other end of the spectrum the function of ethnicity could be and often was to help an insurgent group define its identity negatively...Such indeed was the logic of the discrimination showed by the Kol rebels in their raids on villages where tribal and non-tribal households lived side by side: the former were invariably spared and the latter alone

purity in ritual matters, could launch attacks on the enemies of the Birsaite. Accordingly, attacks against Christian Mundas were planned and orchestrated in the *thanas* of Ranchi, Basia, Khunti, and Tamar on December 24, 1899. On the same day, a Catholic priest Father Carbery was shot with an arrow to the chest⁹⁷. A list of 38 victims in the area under the jurisdiction of the Chakradharpur thana indicates that, besides Christians, *mundas* and *pahans*, local powerholders in the “traditional” order, were the primary targets of the Birsaite⁹⁸. Buda Munda of Kochang, a prominent village *munda*, had earlier been threatened with death for refusing to submit to the authority of the Birsaite⁹⁹. In the same vein, acts of arson against enemies within village communities and skirmishes with the district police followed in January 1900. On January 6, the Khunti police station was attacked by 300 Birsaite, “armed with axes, bows and arrows and guns,” a Munda constable was killed, and nearby houses were burned. On the same day, “they killed a constable and four chaukidars [low-ranked policemen] as well as a European timber contractor and his servant a few miles south of Barju”¹⁰⁰. Given these incidents of limited, well-targeted violence by the Birsaite against those outside their fold, not only the Christian Mundas but also “the great majority of the heathen Mundas [were] against Birsa,” and were “glad to help [the police] catch him”¹⁰¹. Eventually, of course, he was caught with the aid of his many enemies in the Munda villages between Khunti and Bandgaon¹⁰².

What, in retrospect, did the “Munda Raj” of the Birsaite mean? For all previous chroniclers of the Birsaite *ulgulan*, the answer has been a proto-nationalist or anti-colonial utopia. These chroniclers have been misled by a common colonial

subjected to violence”: Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 173-74.

97 C.W. Bolton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, letter dated 10 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

98 List of Outrages in the Chakradharpur thana, Singhbhum, attributed to the followers of Birsa, 28 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

99 Confidential Correspondence Regarding Birsa’s Arrest, H.I.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of India, letter dated 14 September 1895, Foreign Department Proceedings (Internal B) Nos. 117-129, October 1895, NAI.

100 C.W. Bolton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, letter dated 10 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

101 Extract from a letter from H.C. Streatfeild, Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi, dated 4 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

102 Munda Rising in Chota Nagpur Capture of Birsa Munda, IOR/L/PJ/6/532, File 364.

misconception that Birsa's "real enemies [were] the *saheblok* [white folk] and the Government"¹⁰³. The songs of the Birsaite collected by the District Magistrate of Khunti, Kumar Suresh Singh, nearly sixty years after the *ulgulan*, also mislead scholars today. Consider, for example, the following verse from Singh's compilation of these songs in the 1960s:

O Birsa, our land is afloat. Our country drifts away.
O Birsa, reveal the ends of your wisdom. We shall listen to your words.
The big enemy, the Sahebs donning the hat, seized our land.
We shall fight armed with your religion. We will follow you¹⁰⁴.

The memories of the nationalist movement, with its anti-colonial orientation are woven into this remembered history of the Birsaite *ulgulan*. Indeed, there is a *bhajan* (hymn) dedicated to "Birsa and Gandhi"¹⁰⁵. To take these songs to be statements of historical fact is an unwarranted move. Moreover, as Father J.B. Hoffman understood from his mission station in Sarwada, "past events [had] given them reason to think that the Government [would] be readily on their side"¹⁰⁶. The Birsaite also stated their reasoning impeccably to Lal Mritynujoy Nath Shahi Deo in Khunti: "If...they [rose] against Government... then Government [would] do justice to them and restore their lost Raj to them as before"¹⁰⁷. There is neither any anti-colonial sentiment nor is proto-nationalism implied by these statements. The Munda Raj was, arguably, nothing but the Birsaite's vision of a new kind of tribal community under the direct rule of a paternalistic British colonial state without *zamindars*, *mundas*, *pahans* and other local powerholders who upheld the oppressive "traditional" order, under which *bhuinhars*, *khuntkattidars* and other peasant strata labored and lived. Yet, as with many other new forms of politics in colonial India, both subaltern and

103 A. Forbes to C.W. Bolton, letter dated 12 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

104 *Disumtabu atutana Birisal Gamaetabu bualtana Birisal Senra mundi udubabum Birisal Ama' kaji aiumale sobenl Marang bairi tupiakan saeobl Disumtabae eserkedal Laraibu dharam hathiartel Seneale ama' taeomte.*

105 Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chhotanagpur, 1874-1901*, 285.

106 Fr. J.B. Hoffman, S.J., Catholic Missionary of Sarwada, Thana Khunti, to Mr. A. Forbes, Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, letter dated 14 January 1900, IOR/L/PJ/6/540, File 869.

107 Confidential Correspondence Regarding Birsa's Arrest, H.I.S. Cotton, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary of the Government of India, letter dated 14 September 1895, Foreign Department Proceedings (Internal B) Nos. 117-129, October 1895, NAI.

elite, resources from the past were recycled to invent new traditions for a new kind of *communitas*.

4. Conclusion

Afflicted by the oppression of the zamindars,
 The misery of the people grows,
 The country is adrift...
 Birsa Bhagwan is our leader.
 He has come down for us in the land...

This paper has offered an alternative reading of a so-called millenarian movement led by Birsa Munda in Chotanagpur around the turn of the nineteenth century. It has done so by interrogating the notion of “millenarianism” that is often invoked to describe subaltern protests in a religious idiom against modern political authorities. The implicit assumption in these subaltern studies is, as Partha Chatterjee has recently acknowledged, that “the state and forms of governance were external to the immediate social world of peasants”¹⁰⁸. Modern statecraft is treated by such scholars, following Max Weber, as secular, and subalterns are then taken to be an oppositional category in which secularization has not yet occurred. I have challenged this dominant line of scholarly thinking on theologico-political efforts to remake *communitas* in the margins of modern states. Birsa Munda’s *ulgulan*, much like Hong Xiuquan who led the Taiping Rebellion¹⁰⁹, ought to be recognized today as novel forms of political expressions in colonial contexts, and not as atavistic responses to the modern state.

Additionally, this paper has argued that the activists who participated in the Sardar Larai or the Birsaites *ulgulan* did not have anti-colonial or proto-nationalist aims. Radical historians in South Asia and elsewhere have tended to put their own political concerns in the mouths of imagined and/or long-dead “subaltern” heroes. The political romanticism implicit in such an exercise grossly distorts our understanding of adivasi and other pasts that are already difficult to access. A more careful

108 Manu Goswami, “Partha Chatterjee,” *Public Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 182.

109 On Hong Xiuquan and his rebellion, see Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1997).

empirical sifting and interpretation of the historical record can, however, reveal the complex negotiations by different tribal subjects in the margins of the colonial state in nineteenth-century Chotanagpur. Through such an exercise in historical reconstruction, the intertwined nature of statemaking and resistance in modern state margins becomes apparent. Whereas adivasi protest tactics modify the contours of modern statemaking from below, they also deepen the process of statemaking insofar as political subjectivities in the margins are suffused with its logics and languages.
