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THE STATE-SOCIETY INTERACTION: A DEVELOPMENTAL DEBATE

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Do the changes being slowly inculcated in tribal life, represented by the adivasis of Kewlajhiri, add up to development? Do traditional practices, customs, beliefs need to be shed in order to bring about transformation in people's lives? Does the government take into account the wealth of traditional wisdom when it determines how to develop a village?

Introduction: Kewlajhiri and Numbers

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THIS ARTICLE IS BASED IN A small village in Betul tehsil, which lies in the southern-most part of the state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) in India. Kewlajhiri is a small forest village situated at a distance of 4 km from NH 69, with poor road connectivity. It is a Gond-dominated village with four Yadav families, who belong to the Other Backward Class (OBC), and one Vishwakarma family belonging to the Scheduled Caste; thus 92.7% belong to the ST population. The total population of this village in 2011 was 641; with 327 men and 314 women and thus a sex ratio of 960 women per 1000 men. The literacy rate in Kewlajhiri is 58.4%.

Communicating through numbers has its own limitations because the diversity of human life is not reflected in them. Different boundaries[1]—physical, mental, spatial, territorial, etc—get created when one talks about management of and thereby the administration of any population. We usually have Census, National Family and Health Surveys, Socio-

[1]Refer to Joel S. Migdal's concept of boundaries in his book 'Boundaries and Belongings' in 2004.

> The complexities of human life vis-à-vis its fundamental processes are neither accommodated nor entertained in any record books of the modern state

Economic Caste Census and many related policies emerging from such simplifications which mostly regulate the direction in which a poor's life would be turned towards. Such details of the boundaries from the country to the state to the village are simplifications of the variations and the diversities that exist within each of these levels. Such simplifications made by the state—with the intent to govern us—"are always far more static and schematic than the actual social phenomena they presume to typify… It can no more reflect the actual complexity of a farmer's experience…" (Scott 1998, 46-47)

Doubtless, there are far more complex nuances in society than these numbers may reflect. The complexities of human life vis-à-vis its fundamental processes are neither accommodated nor entertained in any record books of the modern state. This divorce from the nuances has neither proved to be beneficial to the common man, that is, the governed, nor has it helped the system make any significant impact on the lives of the people it is meant to serve.

After all, "These typifications are indispensable to statecraft. State simplifications such as maps, census, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a large and complex reality; in order for officials to be able to comprehend aspects of the ensemble, that complex reality must be reduced to schematic categories." (Ibid, 77). However, even under such a circumstance of typified representation, it is worth studying how state and society interact with each other, how the governmental apparatus penetrates society to regulate and appropriate the minutest details of the everyday life of people. Hence, the ways the state keeps data for each and every aspect of its citizens such as regulating ethnicity (as SC/ST/OBC/Gen), food versus nutrition, literacy versus education, sex ratio, health and well-being versus reproductive health, local infrastructure, environment, entitlements and so on, reveals the state-society divide. Here, we will look at the way governmental representation controls and shapes people in their everyday life.

Kewlajhiri: How the Name Emerged

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From the beginning, the name of the village—Kewlajhiri—fascinated me. "How did the village get its name?" was the question that came to my mind on my first visit. I came across two explanations: a religious one and a relatively 'modern' one.

The fifth-generation Gond priest, the *bhagat*, of the village narrates the story of three successive settlements of the Gonds in the region. Once, their wandering ancestors selected a place to settle down, they established their dev with the rituals performed by 'Mata-Maai'[2] who, after fasting for 21 days, performed a puja, offered sacrifices to the forest-goddess and enunciated the name Kewlajhiri, reportedly, as per the wishes of the forest-goddess. Starting with five families, the community expanded to 43 households in Jamun Dhana of Kewlajhiri and 81 households in Kuadhor (or Bada Dhana). This story is similar to the administrative version, though not exactly the same.

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[2] *The woman supposedly gets 'possessed' by the 'Dev' (God) and performs puja and rituals for the Dev.*

The rural poor, "can at best derive very low wages by working as forest labourers or by selling firewood, and since they do not share in the profits made from from the forest produce these wages always remain low, at the subsistence level"

The younger generation believes in another version of how the village got its name. They recount that the colonial forest department felled big trees, to expand the railway tracks network; the wood was used as fuel (coal) for construction work. The middle-aged generation, the sixth of the village, believe that *koyla* (coal) became *kewla*, and because it was situated amidst many streams (*jhora*) that crisscrossed the village, it led to the name Kewlajhiri. Anticipating that forest department officials must also have some information about the history of the village and its name, I spoke to them and when the then Beat Officer (a member of Gond tribe himself), knew very little; he ardently believes that, "The government has done the poor people a favour by giving them land and allowing them to settle; in return, the people must support the forest department in protecting the forest."

I find all these versions interesting because on one hand there is an inherent religious belief dear to the elderly Gond members about their existence in that place; however, on the other hand, there is an increasing tendency in the younger generation to climb up the logical ladder of government. What is interesting is that the outlook towards forest has still not changed even after British government is no more. Their idea of governing forests is still upheld by our Indian government with the original spirit. Guha mentioned, "The unquestioning acceptance of colonial norms, especially with regard to the usurpation of state monopoly right, has characterised post-colonial policy to this day" (Guha 1983, 1888). Although during the post-Independence period the *adivasis* are covered or protected under the Constituition of India where they were given the right to represent themselves politically by the reservation of seats in a joint electorate based on adult franchise, but still, the rural poor, "can at best derive very low wages by working as forest labourers or by selling firewood, and since they do not share in the profits made from from the forest produce these wages always remain low, at the subsistence level. While the rural poor gain little by protecting the tree crop, so far they have always succeeded in establishing their ownership over a patch of land by cutting down the trees and putting it to the plough" (Gadgil and Guha 1992, 196).

Thus the fusion of the two different reasonings for naming the place Kewlajhiri became two sides of a same coin to me. The fear has been, nowadays, transformed into something else! The people now fear the flagbearers of the colonizers! Their confidence has been totally swallowed up by this fear of the consequences if they do not abide by the government, then government might not support them in their living. The fear has transformed itself from a gross visualization of tyranny into a very mixed and subtle feeling of being governed. Sumit Guha, in his study, shows[3] how the forest department developed its own version of history, in order to justify the way it functioned. He researched and came to the conclusion that the very existence of the forest village and the villagers is neither merely a coincidence nor do they live there because of any favour, but rather a result of the functions and the integration of the practices of the government over the years, in constructing and perpetuating a particular history.

[3]*Refer to Sumit Guha's book 'Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991' published in 1999.*

People's mobility and their exposure to the outer world have led to a difference in their perceptions about Kewlajhiri. When they went outside the village, they saw and learned new things; adopted some of those and modified a few existing ones, according to the changing times.

One middle-aged man smilingly told me a very interesting fact, "Outsiders call that hamlet Kewlajhiri, and this one Jamun Dhana …" Surprised I asked, "But this is also Kewlajhiri isn't it?" The other villagers standing around him laughed and the man continued, "Yes, this is also Kewlajhiri, but only because it has more *jamun* (blackberry) trees, it got this name; this is what has been continuing for years."

People's mobility and their exposure to the outer world have led to a difference in their perceptions about Kewlajhiri. When they went outside the village, they saw and learned new things; adopted some of those and modified a few existing ones, according to the changing times. Very simply, they said, "*Samay badal raha hai, duniya aage badh raha hai* (Times are changing, the world is moving forward)." And with changing times, the younger generation's outlook on life and their aspirations have changed and do not match that of the older generation.

Changes in Kewlajhiri: The people of Kewlajhiri were locked in a tug-of-war situation between the elders' strong affinity for their own *adivasi* culture (reflecting a fear of their identity getting lost), and the younger generation's preference for the modern and fashionable world.

Two Dhanas or Two Villages!
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The people of Jamun Dhana say that the Bada Dhana's fortune is shining because, "That hamlet is very close to Khadara Road; and that Dhana also hosts the Beat Guard office. The *up-sarpanch* also resides there. There, you will not find the things that you find here…"

Jamun Dhana is different. "There are more hillocks here than there. The people over there find it easy to call someone or go to some place. This hamlet is difficult to live in." Other responses were, "Whenever people from the outside such as the Ranger or the *sarpanch* visit, they stay in Bada Dhana hamlet. Who is going to cross so many hillocks to come here? With road construction work beginning, there are more vehicles coming inside; Earlier, except the Self-Help Group people (PRADAN), nobody used to come to our hamlet and even they faced many difficulties." Another person said, "The people of that hamlet are familiar with the people of the higher status, more people from that hamlet are employed at the forest nursery as compared to this hamlet. They are more fortunate." Another young man added, "Electricity reached that hamlet first, in 1988, and in this hamlet, it reached just five or six years ago."

The people of Bada Dhana say that they don't like Jamun Dhana because it is within the forest and is difficult to reach. They say, "We don't need to go to that hamlet. We stay in our home, go to the fields, and work. We don't feel good in that hamlet. This hamlet of ours is much more beautiful. Here, you will find people to talk. There, there's not a single person to speak to." The phrase "we don't need to…" caught my attention and I began to think of what could the need be for the people of Jamun Dhana to come to Bada Dhana? I probed further and got the following response, "They come to us for selling curd, buttermilk and ghee, and the people over here purchase from them. So why do we need to go there? The one whose need it is will come or go…"

They used the word *jarurat* which I translated as 'need'. I pondered over the word '*jarurat*', nowadays an established foundation for fostering a relationship based on monetary need and overlooking the *jarurat* of mixing with fellow villagers and being familiar with each other's well-being. The bond

> I sensed a strong desire for families to be at par with the *bade log* (outside their community and of higher status), in terms of establishing a *barabari ka dosti* (an equal relationship) and also the pressure of *naam rakha jayega* (keeping up with the others) are the drivers for a shift in their lifestyle

had already loosened somewhere and it now manifests itself through such mental barriers. Also, the biases of government officials, based on the proximity and remoteness of villages (Chambers 1983), have set in skewed practices whereby the people of Bada Dhana benefit from government programmes, even getting recognized as the official Kewlajhiri, despite it being a relocated hamlet.

Houses: On the Way to In-between-ness

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The traditional houses are wide, with big rooms, without windows, made of mud (walls and floors), wood (pillars), bamboos and tiles (roof), on a raised platform. Interestingly, in Jamun Dhana, I found four houses with windows, including one house that had recently being constructed. These families, and especially the family building a new house asked, "Having windows in the house looks good, doesn't it?"

They have seen the houses of the Mahajans (non-tribal, mostly, upper-caste Hindus). Following these, in some households, mud-walls are being replaced by brick-walls because the people wish to have houses similar to those of

the Mahajans. I talked to those three families with the semi-*pucca* houses and all of them gave similar answers. One of them said, "These days such houses are in fashion, mud-houses serve our purpose better, but are old-fashioned." Another family said, "We have visitors these days from society, and our house has to be presentable." Another family believes that having a brick house with an asbestos roof would create a way for them to go and mix with people of other communities and make way for them to move to the higher strata of society.

I sensed a strong desire for families to be at par with the *bade log* (outside their community and of higher status), in terms of establishing a *barabari ka dosti* (an equal relationship) and also the pressure of *naam rakha jayega* (keeping up with the others) are the drivers for a shift in their lifestyle and it is taking them a long time to complete their wish. One of the *pucca*-house owners said, "We save small amounts of money every year and are slowly getting it made. Till now Rs 60,000 to 70,000 have already been spent… or may be even more." He ran his hands on the wide, black and designed wooden pillars of shagon (teak) and smiled.

The lifestyle these families want to have is influenced by some 'higher' ways of living, and, thus, the roots of the markets are percolating into the layers of society. Similarly, *khatiyas* (cots) are being replaced by 'modern' box-beds made of wood. They say, "These kinds of beds are available in the malls. We just make them here with the wood available from the jungle. It is easier and cheaper."

What has not changed is the pattern of arranging the rooms inside the houses. They make three parallel rooms in their houses. In the Gond culture, the middle room is their main room where their deity resides and one room is the kitchen; these two rooms need to be made with mud, otherwise their 'Dev' will get angry. One person said, "Outsiders will come and sit in the outermost room, have tea and leave. They will not enter inside. It is us who have to live in this house and this is right for us…also we have our deities. We believe that some misdeeds of ours will make him leave us. This is believed as a bad omen in our society." The man stopped, thought for a while, nodded and then said, "A few things are never going to change in our *adivasi* society."

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Blurred Boundaries of Religious Labels

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The idea of religion has also not escaped the purview of rationality. Just as we had two different inter-generational views regarding the name of the village, I found similar inter-generational views about religion. The older generation said, "We belong to the Gond Samaj (community/clan) and our rules and regulations are quite different from yours." The younger generation, on the other hand, who have been through formal schooling, said, "Ours is Hindu religion." Surprised, I asked, "I heard that you belong to the Gond Samaj?" They replied, "No. Gond is our community/clan, but our religion is Hindu. We belong to that religion only. These people are not educated enough…" And then they thought for a while very seriously, and reiterated, "No, ours is Hindu religion."

They were pretty sure that they belonged to the Hindu religion. Interestingly, the respondents belonged to the three well-off families in Jamun Dhana. So, the impact of class or economic status also works on the people,

who agree on the predominant depoliticized view of Gonds as 'Backward Hindus' as propagated by the government or the positioning (Hall 1990, 226) of the Gond religion preserved over the years.

Later, going through the Hindi textbooks, I noticed that there was no mention of any Gondi heroic figures. The books talked mostly of Hindu deities and national leaders. In this way, "governmental interventions simplify the realities to be governed as they succeeded simultaneously in homogenizing the population and differentiating it, setting off those in the margins from the core population in the center." (Migdal 2004, 21).

The Gond tribe is divided into 12-and-a-half Devs. The 'Devs' are synonymous with the Hindu *gotra*. The population of Kewlajhiri belongs to two Devs and has the clans of the '6th Dev' and the '7th Dev'. They believe that there is no hierarchy between the Devs and all the 'Devs' are equal. However, above these 12-and-a-half Devs, is the most powerful Dev…the Bara Dev, who is believed to be Mahadev (Shiva) only. Some of the elders believe

that Bara Dev and Mahadev are different entities and that Bara Dev is even more powerful than Shiva.

According to legend, Mahadev had taken a girl from (that is, married) the Gond community whose name was Maya Gondin and, thus, became the son-in-law of the Gonds. There is a period of 10–15 days when they observe Shivaratri. On the day of Shivaratri, they perform Ujhaal to wash off their sins and impurities, which they have acquired after mingling with the non-tribals, as "*zamana aage badh raha hai.*" By performing Ujhaal, they beg forgiveness for their social transactions[4] with the non-tribes and also ask for leniency so that their Bada Dev does not leave them for their misdeeds. Ujhaal is an act of instilling hope, creating a balance between their usual living and the adoption of newer ways of living. This is a must-do for all families, and they say that they will not change themselves in this aspect of their life.

Guha and Gadgil say that during the early non-tribal empires and the British period, the governance introduced different forms of territorial controls over

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[4]*By social interactions, I mean to say that they go outside for migration, work in the house and fields of the non-tribals, attend various trainings and meetings outside their village, or even provide accommodation to some non-tribals in their houses, etc.*

Thus, when the villagers of Kewlajhiri say that they will not change a few aspects of their lives, it arises from the membrane of that diasporic experience, it is an unuttered need for respect of their heterogeneity and diversity.

the resources that have reshaped the intrinsic belief system of the *adivasis*. They say, "The new system drew on beliefs in the sanctity of individual plants and animals, as well as of elements of landscape, which thousands of endogamous groups had inherited from their food-gathering days… These distinctive belief systems were now woven together into a composite fabric by identifying many of the spirits with a few key Gods in the Hindu pantheon… However, an important element added was devotion, or *bhakti*,… This belief system had a clear role in regulating and moderating the use of natural resources." (Gadgil and Guha 1992, 90)

I have experienced this analysis of Guha and Gadgil throughout my stay and action research phases. Thus, starting from the popular tales behind the names to the current religious practices in Kewlajhiri, I can see an overlapped interplay of the government, a mosaic of cultural practices and an impact of the present market on the everyday lives of the common people. In this context, Hall analyzed this fragmented identity as a product of governmental rationality, which strategically positioned

their (here, the Gonds') socio-religious and cultural practices to experience themselves as the 'other.' (Hall 1990, 225)

Thus, when the villagers of Kewlajhiri say that they will not change a few aspects of their lives, it arises from the membrane of that diasporic experience, it is an unuttered need for respect of their heterogeneity and diversity. The tight-fisted demand (for a better living) and pulling forces, arising from their interaction with the market and its agents (both sellers and other consumers) are catching their attention and causing them to make many changes, mostly in the unconscious realm. There are other domains (of their lives) too, where such changes are happening under the intersectionality of governance, modernity (rationality) and their belief systems.

Food—from Strength to Deliciousness

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Earlier, *makka* (maize), *kodo*, *kutki* and *samariya* were the only staple foods. They learned to grow rice in the *kharif* season some 20–25 years back from the Bengali

community, which had migrated to and settled as permanent community at Chopna.[5] The two communities met during migration. The villagers explain, "A few people from our village went to their villages in search of work. There, they observed how those people used to cultivate their fields and grow paddy." Another viewpoint was, "But here, we have no fine lands as theirs for growing paddy. This area is full of hillocks." The taste in food has also changed; and the younger generation finds rice and wheat tastier than *kodo*, *kutki* and *samariya*.

Almost 22–24 families, which have motor pumps, cultivate wheat in winter. Vegetables such as cherry tomato, *saemi* (flat beans), brinjal and gourd are grown in all courtyards, depending on rain water. The children have chosen wheat over maize because it tastes better, but the elders prefer maize to wheat because maize fills their stomach for a longer time than wheat and rice. Rice and wheat are also being promoted by the government under the Public Distribution System through Fair Price Shops.

[5]*Chopna comes under Shahpur block, which has relatively more plain land than Ghoradongri block.*

> The Gond community considers marriage as one of the biggest rituals of their life processes. There are widely accepted diverse marriage practices in this community. The villagers say that, in earlier times, the beauty of a girl was considered secondary to the fact that the girl could work and take the load of the family.

The government also promotes hybrid seeds of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, etc., for increasing crop production and productivity. In Madhya Pradesh, the average seed replacement rate for paddy and wheat (in 2009–10) was 13.10 per cent and 275.21 per cent, respectively, and quite below the average seed replacement rate for maize (807.88 per cent). This means Madhya Pradesh is lagging behind in the production of rice and wheat than maize, and within the purview of the governmental rationality, the citizens should be provided with nutritional security, food security for rice and wheat, and thus, must be protected from the food price inflation for these two crops.

Hence, the state government provides the primary rural households[6] with 5 kg of wheat and rice per family member @ Re 1/kg and Rs 2/kg, respectively, (GoMP, 2016). So, in Kewlajhiri, people sell the maize grown from certified seeds and consume the indigenous variety of maize, cultivated on a small portion of the field. Thus, it is not at all difficult to understand the implications of governmental rationality on the food regime and the loss of diversity of food, and to explain why these days *kodo*, *kutki* and *samariya* are vanishing from the farmers' plates and are available in big malls and shops, at a much higher price (ranging between Rs 90–120/kg)!

Marriage: From Bonding to Burdening, from Necessity to Desires...

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The Gond community considers marriage as one of the biggest rituals of their life processes. There are widely accepted diverse marriage practices in this community. The villagers say that, in earlier times, the beauty of a girl was considered secondary to the fact that the girl could work and take the load of the family. Marriage was practised through abduction also, with quite a few instances in the village (and sometimes marriage didn't happen at all)! Sometimes, the *bhagat*[7] and the families themselves fixed and arranged the marriage. The concept of dowry did not exist or the people do not recall its practice.

There were gender-just marriage practices, wherein the bride and the groom were presented with gifts and either started living in a new house of their own, or stayed with his family. At that time, the only luxurious food was *dal-chawal*[8]; the neighbours contributed grains and everything was managed peacefully through sharing by the community. The boy's family would carry their own food stuff (rice, *dal*, utensils and wood) in a cart to the marriage. They cooked their own food, thereby not creating any pressure on the girl's family or on the village. We can't even think of such arrangements in modern society. Such practices increased the cooperation between two affinal families (and villages) also.

Nowadays, the needs and desires to bring brides from different villages is increasing, as a result of the interaction of youth in their work or public places, and is gradually heading towards the question of status. By marrying within the village, they will not get the desired *khatirdari* (how they will be looked after during the wedding), a term used by the local and upper-caste Hindu

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[6]*Do not include families under Antyodaya scheme.*
[7]*The Gondi man who performs rituals, religious and spiritual practices in the Gonds.*
[8]*Chawal, or rice, procurement was a luxury even 30 years ago.*

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people. However, the work or public space interaction of the youth is also creating a scope for them to choose their desired partners. Dowry is now becoming a silent characteristic as the norm to gift has increased manifold. Gold is gradually taking its place in their market.

Interestingly, nowadays the groom's family does not carry their own 'rations' and the bride's family has to arrange the food for the marriage party, placing a huge pressure on them. Neighbours still help; some with grains, and some with money and this saves a lot of money for the bride's family and also maintains the relationship between the families in the community.

Things are really turning around. Lalji *dada* (one of the elderly persons in the village) recalls that this desire has come from "*Mahajano ko dekh kar. Humare log jaate the Mahajano ke paas kaam karne aur unke shaadiyan dekh kar aate the…aur yahan aakar bolte the ki hum bhi kar sakte hai aisi shaadiyan. Phir dheere kuch log Mahajano ke saath ghumne lage, dosti badhane lage, aur unke dekha-dekhi unka kharcha bhi badhta gaya…nahi to pehle hum*

itne gareeb nahi the, humare paas kaafi cheezen hua karta tha, par logon ki budhhi me samajh hi nahi aya, ki aaj nahi rakhenge to kal kaise chalega…Gareebee aa gayi humare samaj me…(when people from this village went to work in the houses of the higher castes and class of people and saw their marriages and rituals, they started taking up some of these practices in the Gond marriage rituals. Gradually, as they mixed with the upper-class Hindus, they started mimicking their lifestyles and a sense of competition grew that, 'even we can have these kind of marriages. We need money for this and for that we will also do what these people do'. Lalji *dada* emphasized that this desire of the Gonds to give in to peer pressure and spend more was leading to discarding the earlier frugal lifestyle and the adopting of a new expensive lifestyle. This was leading to debt and poverty.)"

There are many governmental initiatives for marriages such as mass weddings under the Mukhya Mantri Kanyadaan Yojna[9]. The market and peer pressure made people, although subtly, emulate the hierarchical differences (as Mahajans are higher than the *adivasis*—backward Hindus) of

the caste systems. However, these days, many people are migrating to the cities for work and are engaged in construction works, where they earn higher wages than they get from agricultural labour. This is also contributing to higher aspirations and, therefore, leading to emulating the practices of the higher castes. They have started believing that this is how life should be. This is like a complex web of closely knitted traps of consumerism.

Entertainment
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This desire has also extended to (and has changed) their modes of entertainment, which has now shifted to playing movies and songs on CD-DVD players, speakers and mobiles and radios. People switch on their radios, play songs from very early in the morning and do all their domestic works to the accompaniment of film music. Shanti *didi* says, "I longed for years that the radio should be played in our house too." Another young boy said, "The radio has FM channels, so sometimes songs and sometimes some other programmes are broadcast…"

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[9]For details, refer to http://www.newincept.com/madhyapradesh/mukhya-mantri-kanyadan-yojana-madhya-pradesh.html

> The earlier folk-lores, songs and dances that used to come up from the lived experiences of the people have, nowadays, been replaced by TV, radio and various artistes.

However, for most of the time, the flow of the medium of entertainment (such as the radio, television, etc.) is used to carry political news to the village in a very subtle and dynamic manner. So, listening to music at one moment and another programme next becomes actually very free-flowing.

Thus, in the context of the village, the radio has had widespread infiltration into society due to technological advancements, that is, radio as a feature in mobile phones. Kamla Bai says, "We just put it on and leave it and the songs come. We listen and do the chores…" So, it is also about the choices of the user. The earlier folk-lores, songs and dances that used to come up from the lived experiences of the people have, nowadays, been replaced by TV, radio and various artistes.

My encounter with one of the folk-songs emerging from the lives of the women was, "*Paintees ka pauwa do ka chana, pi ke maare roje dina…*(Having a quarter of liquor worth Rs 35 and snacks worth Rs 2, my husband beats me every single day)." This is not a very old song. We see that the song speaks about the consequences of rising alcoholism in the community; the wife sings this song among her peers[10]. It tells us that the husbands beat up their wives daily after drinking. It portrays the daily lived sufferings of the women. What is interesting is that they have composed songs about their sufferings so that they can smile through their pain.

Health

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People of Kewlajhiri prefer to use the locally available medicinal herbs over medicines for treating common ailments. Although the people's inclination, nowadays, is increasingly turning to private health practices, their profound belief in the *bhagat* and *bhumka*[11] is still in place. My stay in the village gave me a chance to witness some such practices wherein the *bhagat* cured people's ailments. The people have immense faith in their treatment systems. However, it is very unfortunate that the limelight is shifting to modern medicine (allopathy) that is overshadowing these practices that are now being ignored as superstitions.

A discussion with the *bhagat* revealed that these are special skills that require special training, along with huge concentration, dedication and practice. This can neither be inherited, nor can just about anybody become a *bhagat*. With the advent of modern medicine, the young are not willing to learn this knowledge because they believe, "These days (modern) medicines can cure almost all the diseases." The *bhagat* was disappointed with the lack of dedication and faith regarding this among the youth, "Today's youth lack the dedication to learn all these things!"

The government uses a few variables such as the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), the Under-5 Mortality Rate

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[10]But the most interesting thing I found was the context in which and how this song was used by Munni didi *against Rangolal* bhaiya *(her spouse). We were sitting, one morning, the day after Shivaratri and Rangolal* bhaiya *offered me a quarter of desi liquor. I chose to take it and we were having the liquor in the courtyard where Munni* didi *and the children were cooking the meal. Bhaiya* spoke about how he would celebrate Holi (with liquor only). *Munni didi took this chance to poke him and sang the song (dancingly) in my presence. She knew very well that* bhaiya *would not say anything to her when I was there and she could easily remind him how his alcoholism makes her suffer, and also, I would get to know. I was really amused by this and couldn't resist appreciating her wit.*

[11]Bhagat *and* bhumkas *are persons who cure and heal many diseases and help exorcize possession by any (bad)-spirit.*

> The tribals have adapted themselves according to the Gond community they are living with, in an attempt to remain at par with the Gonds

(U5MR), the Malnutrition Status and the Maternal Health Status to understand the status of the basic healthcare practices of a place. The Public Health Centre (PHC) for Kewlajhiri is located at a distance of almost 6–7 km from the village at Neempani and that too with not many healthcare facilities. Rather, a majority of the people prefers to visit the private medical clinics located as far as 10–15 km away because they get quick relief, polite behaviour and have a shorter waiting period. This makes healthcare problematic, especially for the vulnerable and the poor sections of the villagers. Good facilities for institutional deliveries are available at the PHC in Ghoradongri town, almost 35 km away from the village.

The Interplay of Castes

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In this region, a typical village can be divided into four main caste categories: Brahmins (Pandits), Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). In general, Kewlajhiri is a forest village where, administratively, the STs form most of the

population, with a few OBC and SC families. No Brahmin family resides in the village; yet they influence the people from outside.

Adivasis believe that they are above the SC community in every respect. There is much discrimination against the *adivasis*, with respect to food and water and touch from the other castes, especially the OBC and the Pandits in Kewlajhiri. However, *adivasis* call the Yadavs *Gwalihun*—cattle herders, who make their livelihood from cattle; They do not consider the Yadavs as superior to themselves.

The ST families, on the other hand, say that STs do not match upto the social conduct rules of OBCs. OBCs label the *adivasis* as backwards, "*Yadav humare naam rakhte hai.* (Yadavs bad-mouth us behind our backs)." As per the OBC, the STs belong to the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy and consider the SC better than the ST. The SC women are not allowed to cook food for any other household in the village, not even in the *anganwadi*. However, it was interesting to note how the SC, ST and OBC women often meet in SHGs to save money. All these

categories believe that the caste system should exist.

Despite all these colours, there is still some blurriness. Kamla Bai is from the Yadav community. She wears *kadhi* (in the legs) and a 16-gauge saree (*lugda*); she has also inscribed the traditional Gond tattoo on her arms. Initially, I thought that she was a tribal. Later, I observed that all the Yadav women have adopted the tribal language (Gondi/Parsi[12]), jewellery and the way of wearing a saree. They even go to the *bhagat* to get rid of evil spirits. However, very few like Kamla Bai have marked their body with tattoos (*gudwana*).

The tribals have adapted themselves according to the Gond community they are living with, in an attempt to remain at par with the Gonds, especially because they are residing illegally on tribal land. I also observed that the OBC girls never mix with the Gondi girls, and hardly come out of their house and homesteads. However, the boys from the Yadav community do mix with other boys in the village frequently while maintaining their identity as Yadavs. In

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[12] *The Gonds named their language as Parsi, it is not literally Parsi.*

> Money brings a change in their thinking. They don't like to go to other people's houses to watch TV. They want their own, something which, in some ways, affects the cohesion of the community.

Kewlajhiri, my encounter with the interplay of castes was no different than the mainstream norms prevalent in society; however, yes, now people have learned to wear masks in front of each other for their own interests.

The Economy

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People earn their living in many different ways. Kewlajhiri Jamun Dhana has not received many agricultural benefits, except access to forest for fuel wood, *kisan* credit cards, and cooperative societies. Their livelihood options are selling fuel wood, collecting non-timber forest produce (NTFP) such as *mahua* flowers, *mahua* seeds, *tendu* leaves, *achar*, *aonla*, dried *bel*, or *mahka*, and *chakota* seeds, working as labour in the forest nursery, rearing mulberry worms, crop remuneration after crop loss, grazing cattle, cultivating vegetables, selling grain and animals, selling milk and milk products, earning wages from road construction and other works, selling fruit (guava, lemon, tamarind, papaya, etc.) and doing subsistence farming or migrating for work to the cities.

No one goes to bed hungry because almost all of them have land; moreover, the forest is always there to feed them. What is difficult, however, is to work hard constantly in a forest village; and they always find some way or other to arrange their food for subsistence by growing seasonal vegetables in their homestead. Weekly market purchases include edible oil, salt, potato, onion, garlic, spices, some leafy vegetables and toiletries.

Only 30 per cent of the 43 households in Jamun Dhana grow cash crops (raising mulberry silk worms and selling cocoons in the mulberry collective). For a very few families like Geeta Bai's, it has proved to be economical, "For the coming year, the kids are asking for a television set. They say that it is a must in the house, and they don't like watching TV in other people's homes. So, this time we will listen to them."

Some of the activities that a few people like Geeta Bai are adopting give them monetary returns; with this, their desires too are changing. Money brings a change in their thinking. They don't like to go to other people's houses

to watch TV. They want their own, something which, in some ways, affects the cohesion of the community.

The circulation of money and the market exchange are making the situation even worse for the community at large. Those who are well-off (not even 10 per cent[13] of the total families of Jamun Dhana) are the least affected by any small changes in the market because they have many sources of income. The poor families, however, with limited sources of income, are the most affected ones, even with the slightest changes in any aspect of their lives.

The economic aspect of their lives is greatly impacted by governmental practices. Some well-off families in Jamun Dhana accessed policies such as orchard plantations, old-age pension scheme, and widow pension scheme and became well-off. However, being able to access these schemes entails several visits to the *panchayat* and the banks. It costs almost twice as much to get the amount they get as pensions. These policies actually get implemented at the

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[13]*I calculated during the survey conducted in the first stay.*

cost of the probable, local, coping strategies of the people.

The Polity

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Madhya Pradesh has been ruled by a stable government, with the leading political parties being the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Madhya Pradesh Kisan Mazdoor Adivasi Kranti Dal, the Madhya Pradesh Vikas Congress, and the Pragatisheel Bahujan Samaj Party. The current Madhya Pradesh government has faced criticism for being under the guardianship of its fountainhead organization, the RSS. However, except during the elections, I hardly see the people of Jamun Dhana taking active part in the current trend of politics. They have their own way of interaction in this current political scenario.

Several times the villagers interacted with government officials when they wanted to access government policies or make citizenship claims. As residents of a forest village, they have frequent interactions with the forest Beat Officer. At one point of time, the relations between the villagers and the Beat Officer became so bitter over the distribution

of the payment for *tendu patta* collection that the women of the SHG (with the support of the PRADAN Executive) went to the Collector, praying for direct payment into their accounts. That was, apparently, a scary and humiliating experience for the women as well as the Executive. However, despite all the obstacles they faced, the payment finally began coming into their accounts.

A year later, due to the 'village action-plans' facilitated by PRADAN, the villagers again had to knock at the doors of the *panchayat* office. This time they went with an application for the construction of a road (measuring almost 2 km) from Khadara Road to their village. Their application was not accepted by the *panchayat* nor were they told the reason for the rejection. They were sent to the Beat Office repeatedly. The people came to know that the Forest Department had already issued a 'No Objection Certificate' to the *panchayat* many years earlier and, thus, it had no say in the road-construction within the forest village. The villagers felt really cheated.

After some rounds of to and fro, they finally knocked at the doors of the Collector's Office again (the earlier Collector had

been transferred meanwhile), remembering the success they had met with the last time. They made three or four trips and were not allowed to meet the Collector. Finally, one day they waited for the Collector and sat on a strike for almost half a working day. Ultimately, seeing the large gathering on strike, the Collector was compelled to come outside his office and meet them.

Just as the earlier Collector had done, the new Collector spoke very roughly to the people. After many questions and counter-questions, the officials checked the old documents and it was discovered that the road had not been built due to the reluctance of the officials and various departments.

The villagers 'repaid' the reluctance and inefficiency of the old *sarpanch* by defeating him in the *panchayat* elections in 2014. They elected a new candidate, who had earlier lost the elections three consecutive times, and said, "We will see what he does. We have elected him this time. He says he will work. If he does not, we will see that he also loses after five years."

It was pretty interesting to see the Gond headmen bringing the

matters of the Gond *panchayat* to the administrative *panchayat*. When the elders of the Gond tribe were asked about their Gond *panchayats*, they themselves sounded disappointed with their representative. One of them said, "Nowadays, it is immaterial whether we have our *jaati-panchayat* or not. That only exists in name. Whatever work happens, is getting done by the *sarkari panchayat*."

Another elder from the family of the Gond Mukaddam[14] said, "The present Mukaddam also abides by the *sarkari panchayat* nowadays. A separate *jaati panchayat* is redundant these days, and gradually, it will cease to exist, we think." The first elder said, "The *jaati panchayat* does not function beyond the clan or *jaati*, and these are the times of the *sarkar*. The stronger the *sarkari panchayat* is becoming, the more the *jaati panchayat* is fading away. We don't know what will happen in the coming days!" Clearly, the elders have no hope in or expectations of their own *jaati panchayat*. They believe that all the work is being done by the *sarkari panchayat*. The young in the village say, "There is a *jaati panchayat* in the village covering two hamlets; we have never experienced it," that is,

they have not seen it working on any issues yet. For them, the *panchayat* is the *sarkari panchayat*, an institution they can approach for work.

Sumit Guha, tracing the history of British governance, noted, "The *maai-baap sarkar* (Wikipedia describes it as "a style of government that is a benevolent dictatorship or nanny-state") needed a more grateful set of children and, by the 1930s, the 'child-like' aborigines were the best available candidates for the role." (Guha 1999, 185). And the moniker of '*maai-baap*' government is true in many situations because, in a sense, its role is to protect their children's vulnerability and dependencies. The response, "*Ab to sarkar ka jamana hai*" (It is now government's time) touches this issue of dependency of their beneficiaries.

Thus, to summarize, the transformations are a function of complex and mutually reinforcing networks of ecological, economic, political and cultural processes and at the intersection of all of these are the everyday lives of the people. At this junction the question that comes to my mind is what significant role does the

government play in this entire process? Does it actually intend to bring in well-being in people's everyday lives, thus enabling people to lead their lives or has it actually acted in a detrimental way against the promised well-being thus incurring the atrocities upon the entire society? This is a question which we need to ponder upon in the course of time.

The ecological changes (felling of trees and charcoal making), started during the British rule, have changed the way the people see their livelihood practices. These were, indeed, policy level changes and the process is still unfolding. Not only the people but the forest also is paying the price of the forest laws. The trees, and the land on which the trees grow, both are now mostly under the control of the Forest Department and the recognition of the life-support role that the forests play in the lives of the people is limited to a handful of *adivasis*, who know the importance of medicinal plants and some activists.

The people, their caste dynamics, and the increasing desire to emulate the so-called elite way of living amidst a malfunctioning

[14]*Mukaddam is the word used to denote the head of Gond jaati panchayat.*

> Those fascinated by the trappings of modernity and modernization started believing that they were different and that they were not good enough and they wanted to be better.

panchayat with selective policies—all evoke a sense of frustration for the situation and are an indication of compromised governance practices. The houses, modern apparel and accessories, food, TV and radio, motorcycles, dowry and high expenditure in weddings are all reflective of the transformation caused by governmental interventions and its consumerist market mechanism.

People are still negotiating each and every aspect of their lives and coming to terms with changing notions. For a while, Kewlajhiri's isolation acted as a natural protection against the changing tide but it is now experiencing a state of transition from wilderness to 'so-called' development and civilization with new governmental interventions, becoming socially overloaded, and running after money to get economically stable.

Conclusion

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Transformation has occurred in every aspect of tribal life in Kewlajhiri. The labels of modernity have their own politics embedded in it. However, it is also very impotant for us to think about what we consider modern,

developed and development. Do we ever see eating or defecation or taking a bath and maintaining personal hygiene as a global or universal thing? I think many readers will smile at this question. But in this progressive world we are witnessing a change in the food (either items, habits, fads or the nourishment) that is being consumed, table manners, sanitary products being used, apparel and codes and conduct of dressing, conversation and many such things as modern and developed. All these aspects of life and the related values and notions are seeing a transformation with the people aspiring to become 'modern'.

The initiation of such patterns of dependency began during the colonial rule or may be before that, and with more than six decades of independence and citizens' rights being guaranteed by the Constitution, it has multiplied across the arena of everyday life, even in a forest village. In Jamun Dhana, the external differences (as they appear to an outsider's eye), are now fading away as modernity arrives with electricity, mobile phones, banks, hospitals, transportation and ideas, but the fear and frustration of not

achieving the aspired modern standards still remain ingrained, deep within the hearts of the people, even for me at times.

In what ways can fear be transformed into confidence? What possible praxis may help us to stand up and raise our voice? These questions left me standing at the junction of hope and despair, action and frustrations at times. Throughout my village stay and study, one thing that was evident was the belief of the villagers that 'we are different' and this difference is always going to be there. However, I realized that their lives are not very different; the only difference that I saw was in the availability of facilities and the exposure to external environments. Those fascinated by the trappings of modernity and modernization started believing that they were different and that they were not good enough and they wanted to be better.

Kewlajhiri and its inhabitants have led me to think of what actually is needed to live life in peace and happiness. To what extent will this *jamana* move ahead? How modern are we really and how modern do we desire to become? Are we as modern as we claim to be? For the people

The governmental categorization of people as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, forest villages and revenue villages makes it easier to govern people; and the governmental interventions, as welfare measures for these categories, exist as an image of the state.

of Kewlajhiri, even I am a part of that modern *jamana* because I too own some of the things that they desire.

I find this interplay of boundaries true for the people of Kewlajhiri. I find that the question existing between the two worlds of 'who they are to others' and 'where they stand in one group or another' is politicized by some religious as well as political groups, who literally drag them to their sides—are they Hindus or are they Christians? Probably they are neither of these two, and nor are they pure Adivasis now. Santulal *bhaiya* said, "We are not completely *adivasi*. We have become half *adivasi*. Neither do we have full knowledge of ourselves, nor do we want to know about ourselves. It is just carrying on like that…and in schools, everything is being

taught in Hindi and that is why the children are forgetting Gondi. Moreover, people bring brides from outside the village, who have studied Hindi in their schools. Look at my wife, she does not speak Gondi, but she understands Gondi…and the government works are done in Hindi only… and you people speak English, isn't it?"

As Santulal *bhaiya* says, they have become half-*adivasi*— the horizonless, colourless, stateless, rootless, (Hall 1990, 226) diaspora with a positioned cultural identity at the cutting edges of the development—being continuously de-shaped and re-shaped by the developmental and governmental rationalities. The governmental categorization of people as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, forest villages and revenue villages makes it

easier to govern people; and the governmental interventions, as welfare measures for these categories, exist as an image of the state.

However, whether these interventions are actually supporting them or not remains a point of developmental debate. Generation after generation, we are becoming more exposed to global premises, in terms of values or life-styles or daily life-practices. Many new acts and laws facilitate the changing of our practices and we slip into measuring development in terms of these new attributes of a globalized assemblage of governmental practices.

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